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THE BOOKS OF ESTHER  
JOB, PROVERBS, AND  
ECCLESIASTES

BY

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## THE BOOK OF ESTHER

### THE NET SPREAD

'After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. 2. And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. 3. Then the king's servants which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4. Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew. 5. And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. 7. In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8. And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.'—ESTHER iii, 1-11.

THE stage of this passage is filled by three strongly marked and strongly contrasted figures: Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus; a sturdy nonconformist, an arrogant and vindictive minister of state, and a despotic and careless king. These three are the visible persons, but behind them is an unseen and unnamed Presence, the God of Israel, who still protects His exiled people.

We note, first, the sturdy nonconformist. 'The reverence' which the king had commanded his servants to show to Haman was not simply a sign of respect, but an act of worship. Eastern adulation regarded a

monarch as in some sense a god, and we know that divine honours were in later times paid to Roman emperors, and many Christians martyred for refusing to render them. The command indicates that Ahasuerus desired Haman to be regarded as his representative, and possessing at least some reflection of godhead from him. European ambassadors to Eastern courts have often refused to prostrate themselves before the monarch on the ground of its being degradation to their dignity; but Mordecai stood erect while the crowd of servants lay flat on their faces, as the great man passed through the gate, because he would have no share in an act of worship to any but Jehovah. He might have compromised with conscience, and found some plausible excuses if he had wished. He could have put his own private interpretation on the prostration, and said to himself, 'I have nothing to do with the meaning that others attach to bowing before Haman. I mean by it only due honour to the second man in the kingdom.' But the monotheism of his race was too deeply ingrained in him, and so he kept 'a stiff backbone' and 'bowed not down.'

That his refusal was based on religious scruples is the natural inference from his having told his fellow-porters that he was a Jew. That fact would explain his attitude, but would also isolate him still more. His obstinacy piqued them, and they reported his contumacy to the great man, thus at once gratifying personal dislike, racial hatred, and religious antagonism, and recommending themselves to Haman as solicitous for his dignity. We too are sometimes placed in circumstances where we are tempted to take part in what may be called constructive idolatry. There arise, in our necessary co-operation with those who do not

share in our faith, occasions when we are expected to unite in acts which we are thought very straitlaced for refusing to do, but which, conscience tells us, cannot be done without practical disloyalty to Jesus Christ. Whenever that inner voice says 'Don't,' we must disregard the persistent solicitations of others, and be ready to be singular, and run any risk rather than comply. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God,' has to be our motto, whatever fellow-servants may say. The gate of Ahasuerus's palace was not a favourable soil for the growth of a devout soul, but flowers can bloom on dunghills, and there have been 'saints' in 'Cæsar's household.'

Haman is a sharp contrast to Mordecai. He is the type of the unworthy characters that climb or crawl to power in a despotic monarchy, vindictive, arrogant, cunning, totally oblivious of the good of the subjects, using his position for his own advantage, and ferociously cruel. He had naturally not noticed the one erect figure among the crowd of abject ones, but the insignificant Jew became important when pointed out. If he had bowed, he would have been one more nobody, but his not bowing made him somebody who had to be crushed. The childish burst of passion is very characteristic, and not less true to life is the extension of the anger and thirst for vengeance to 'all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.' They were 'the people of Mordecai,' and that was enough. 'He thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone.' What a perverted notion of personal dignity which thought the sacrifice of the one offender beneath it, and could only be satisfied by a blood-bath into which a nation should be plunged! Such an extreme of frantic lust for murder is only possible in such a

state as Ahasuerus's Persia, but the prostitution of public position to personal ends, and the adoption of political measures at the bidding of wounded vanity, and to gratify blind hatred of a race, is possible still, and it becomes all Christian men to use their influence that the public acts of their nation shall be clear of that taint.

Haman was as superstitious as cruel, and so he sought for auguries from heaven for his hellish purpose, and cast the lot to find the favourable day for bringing it about. He is not the only one who has sought divine approval for wicked public acts. Religion has been used to varnish many a crime, and *Te Deums* sung for many a victory which was little better than Haman's plot.

The crafty denunciation of the Jews to the king is a good specimen of the way in which a despot is hoodwinked by his favourites, and made their tool. It was, no doubt, true that the Jews' laws were 'diverse from those of every people,' but it was not true that they did not 'keep the king's laws,' except in so far as these required worship of other gods. In all their long dispersion they have been remarkable for two things,—their tenacious adherence to the Law, so far as possible in exile, and their obedience to the law of the country of their sojourn. No doubt, the exiles in Persian territory presented the same characteristics. But Haman has had many followers in resenting the distinctiveness of the Jew, and charging on them crimes of which they were innocent. From Mordecai onwards it has been so, and Europe is to-day disgraced by a crusade against them less excusable than Haman's. Hatred still masks itself under the disguise of political expediency, and says, 'It is not for the king's profit to suffer them.'

But the true half of the charge was a eulogium, for it implied that the scattered exiles were faithful to God's laws, and were marked off by their lives. That ought to be true of professing Christians. They should obviously be living by other principles than the world adopts. The enemy's charge 'shall turn unto you for a testimony.' Happy shall we be if observers are prompted to say of us that 'our laws are diverse' from those of ungodly men around us!

The great bribe which Haman offered to the king is variously estimated as equal to from three to four millions sterling. He, no doubt, reckoned on making more than that out of the confiscation of Jewish property. That such an offer should have been made by the chief minister to the king, and that for such a purpose, reveals a depth of corruption which would be incredible if similar horrors were not recorded of other Eastern despots. But with Turkey still astonishing the world, no one can call Haman's offer too atrocious to be true.

Ahasuerus is the vain-glorious king known to us as Xerxes. His conduct in the affair corresponds well enough with his known character. The lives of thousands of law-abiding subjects are tossed to the favourite without inquiry or hesitation. He does not even ask the name of the 'certain people,' much less require proof of the charge against them. The insanity of weakening his empire by killing so many of its inhabitants does not strike him, nor does he ever seem to think that he has duties to those under his rule. Careless of the sanctity of human life, too indolent to take trouble to see things with his own eyes, apparently without the rudiments of the idea of justice, he wallowed in a sty of self-indulgence, and, while greedy of adulation

and the semblance of power, let the reality slip from his hands into those of the favourite, who played on his vices as on an instrument, and pulled the strings that moved the puppet. We do not produce kings of that sort nowadays, but King Demos has his own vices, and is as easily blinded and swayed as Ahasuerus. In every form of government, monarchy or republic, there will be would-be leaders, who seek to gain influence and carry their objects by tickling vanity, operating on vices, calumniating innocent men, and the other arts of the demagogue. Where the power is in the hands of the people, the people is very apt to take its responsibilities as lightly as Ahasuerus did his, and to let itself be led blindfold by men with personal ends to serve, and hiding them under the veil of eager desire for the public good. Christians should 'play the citizen as it becomes the gospel of Christ,' and take care that they are not beguiled into national enmities and public injustice by the specious talk of modern Hamans.

### ESTHER'S VENTURE

'Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai: 11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. 12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? 15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

'Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the



house. 2. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre. 3. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.'—ESTHER iv. 10-17; v. 1-3.

PATRIOTISM is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which have marked them ever since,—accommodating flexibility, strangely united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew that the

porter was the queen's cousin, and probably her Jewish birth was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob, who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection, to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther's conversation with the confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai's request that she should appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death; and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been summoned for a month. We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite.

wife! No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

But, passing from this, we need only observe how clearly Esther sees and how calmly she tells Mordecai the tremendous risk which following his counsel would bring. Note that she does not refuse. She simply puts the case plainly, as if she invited further communication. 'This is how things stand. Do you still wish me to run the risk?' That is poor courage which has to shut its eyes in order to keep itself up to the mark. Unfortunately, the temperament which clearly sees dangers and that which dares them are not often found together in due proportion, and so men are over-rash and over-cautious. This young queen with her clear eyes saw, and with her brave heart was ready to face, peril to her life. Unless we fully realise difficulties and dangers beforehand, our enthusiasm for great causes will ooze out at our fingers' ends at the first rude assault of these. So let us count the cost before we take up arms, and let us take up arms after we have counted the cost. Cautious courage, courageous caution, are good guides. Either alone is a bad one.

Mordecai's grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others' good. His words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther's peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched hopes to it. Think of Mordecai's years of care over and pride in his fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction; and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen, and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen, and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other. How many good men's sons have been swept away by the immoralities of great cities! How few families there are in which there is not 'one dead,' the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks out in the slums, it will

come uptown into the grand houses, and the outcasts will prove that they are the rich man's brethren by infecting him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father's house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does such a confidence agree with fear of 'destruction'? The two parts of Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther's help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God's purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not

paralyse, devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line of God's purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that their work helps forward what is dear to God's heart may well do with their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. 'Here am I; take me,' should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice for others' good is the thought of God's purpose in giving Esther her position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their 'talents,' not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine's soul rose to the occasion, and responded with a swift determination to her older cousin's lofty words. Her pathetic request for the

prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions.

‘If I perish, I perish!’ Think of the fair, soft lips set to utter that grand surrender, and of all the flowery and silken cords which bound the young heart to life, so bright and desirable as was assured to her. Note the resolute calmness, the Spartan brevity, the clear sight of the possible fatal issue, the absolute submission. No higher strain has ever come from human lips. This womanly soul was of the same stock as a Miriam, a Deborah, Jephthah’s daughter; and the same fire burned in her,—utter devotion to Israel because entire consecration to Israel’s God. Religion and patriotism were to her inseparable. What was her individual life compared with her people’s weal and her God’s will? She was ready without a murmur to lay her young radiant life down. Such ecstasy of willing self-sacrifice raises its subject above all fears and dissolves all hindrances. It may be wrought out in uneventful details of our small lives, and may illuminate these as truly as it sheds imperishable lustre over the lovely figure standing in the palace court, and waiting for life or death at the will of a sensual tyrant.

The scene there need not detain us. We can fancy Esther’s beating heart putting fire in her cheek, and her subdued excitement making her beauty more splendid as she stood. What a contrast between her and the arrogant king on his throne! He was a

voluptuary, ruined morally by unchecked licence,—a monster, as he could hardly help being, of lust, self-will, and caprice. She was at that moment an incarnation of self-sacrifice and pure enthusiasm. The blind world thought that he was the greater; but how ludicrous his condescension, how vulgar his pomp, how coarse his kindness, how gross his prodigal promises by the side of the heroine of faith, whose life he held in his capricious hand!

How amazed the king would have been if he had been told that one of his chief titles to be remembered would be that moment's interview! Ahasuerus is the type of swollen self-indulgence, which always degrades and coarsens; Esther is the type of self-sacrifice which as uniformly refines, elevates, and arrays with new beauty and power. If we would reach the highest nobleness possible to us, we must stand with Esther at the gate, and not envy or imitate Ahasuerus on his gaudy throne. 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My sake and the gospel's, the same shall find it.'

### MORDECAI AND ESTHER

'For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'—ESTHER iv. 14.

ALL Christians are agreed in holding the principles which underlie our missionary operations. They all believe that the world is a fallen world, that without Christ the fallen world is a lost world, that the preaching of the Gospel is the way to bring Christ to those



who need Him, that to the Church is committed the **ministry of reconciliation.**

These are the grand truths from which the grand missionary enterprise has sprung. It is not my intention to enlarge on them now. But in this and in all cases, there are secondary motives besides, and inferior to those which are derived from the real fundamental principles. We are stimulated to action not only because we hold certain great principles, but because they are reinforced by certain subordinate considerations.

It is the duty of all Christians to promote the missionary cause on the lofty grounds already referred to. Besides that, it may be in a special way our duty for some additional reasons drawn from peculiarities in our condition. Circumstances do not make duties, but they may bring a special weight of obligation on us to do them. Times again do not make duties, but they too make a thing a special duty now. The consideration of consequences may not decide us in matters of conscience, but it may allowably come in to deter us from what is on higher grounds a sin to be avoided, or a good deed to be done. Success or failure is an alternative that must not be thought of when we are asking ourselves, 'Ought I to do this?' but when we have answered that question, we may go to work with a lighter heart and a firmer hand if we are sure that we are not going to fail.

All these are inferior considerations which do not avail to determine duty and do not go deep enough to constitute the real foundation of our obligation. They are considerations which can scarcely be shut out, and should be taken in in determining the weight of our obligation, in shaping the selection of our duties, in

stimulating the zeal and sedulousness with which we do what we know to be right.

To a consideration of some of these secondary reasons for energy in the work of missions I ask your attention. The verse which I have selected for my text is spoken by Mordecai to Esther, when urging her to her perilous patriotism. It singularly blends the statesman and the believer. He sees that if she selfishly refuses to identify herself with her people, in their calamity, the wave that sweeps them away will not be stayed outside her royal dwelling; he knows too much of courts to think that she can stand against that burst of popular fury should it break out. But he looks on as a devout man believing God's promises, and seeing past all instruments; he warns her that 'deliverance and enlargement shall arise.' He is no fatalist; he believes in man's work, therefore he urges her to let herself be the instrument by which God's work shall be done. He is no atheist; he believes in God's sovereign power and unchangeable faithfulness, therefore he looks without dismay to the possibility of her failure. He knows that if she is idle, all the evil will come on her head, who has been unfaithful, and that in spite of that God's faithfulness shall not be made of none effect. He believes that she has been raised to her position for God's sake, for her brethren's sake, not her own.

'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' There speaks the devout statesman, the court-experienced believer. He has seen favourites tended and tossed aside, viziers powerful and beheaded, kings half deified and deserted in their utmost need. Sitting at the gate there, he has seen generations of Hamans go out and in; he has seen the craft, the cruelty, the lusts which have been the apparent

causes of the puppets' rise and fall, and he has looked beyond it all and believed in a Hand that pulled the wires, in a King of Kings who raiseth up one and setteth down another. So he believes that his Esther has come to the kingdom by God's appointment, to do God's work at God's time. And these convictions keep him calm and stir her.

We may find here a series of considerations having a special bearing on this missionary work. To them I ask your attention.

I. God gives us our position that we may use it for His cause, for the spread of the Gospel.

In most general terms.

(a) No man has anything for his own sake—no man liveth to himself. We come to the kingdom for others. Here we touch the foundation of all authority; we learn the awful burden of all talents, the dreadful weight of every gift.

(b) No man receives the Gospel for his own sake. We are not non-conductors, but stand all linked hand in hand. We are members of the body that the blood may flow freely through us. For no loftier reason did God light the candle than that it might give light. We are beacons kindled to transmit, till every sister height flashes back the ray.

(c) We especially have received a position in the world for the conversion of the world. Our national character and position unite that of the Jew in his two stages—we are set to be the 'light of the world,' and we are 'tribes of the wandering foot.' Our history, all, has tended to this function, our local position, our laws, our commerce. We are citizens of a nation which 'as a nest has found the riches' of the peoples. In every land our people dwell.

Think of our colonies. Think that we are brought into contact with heathen, whether we will or not. We cannot help influencing them. 'Through you the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles.' Think of our sailors. Why this position? What is plainer than that all this is in order that the Gospel might be spread? God has ever let the Gospel follow in the tracks made for it by commercial law.

This object does not exclude others. Our language, our literature, our other rich spiritual treasures, we hold them all that we may impart. But remember that all these other good things that England has will spread themselves with little effort, people will be glad to get them. But the Gospel will not be spread so. It must be taken to those who do not want it. It must be held forth with outstretched hands to 'a disobedient and gainsaying people.' It is found of them that seek it not.

Like the Lord we must go to the wanderers, we must find them as they lie panting and thirsty in the wild wilderness. Therefore Christian men must make special earnest efforts or the work will not be done. They must be as the 'dew that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.'

And again, such action does not involve approval of the means by which such a position has become ours. Mordecai knew what vile passions had been at work to put Esther there, and did not forget poor Vashti, and we have no need to hide conviction that England's place has often been won by wrong, been kept by violence and fraud, that, as she has strode to empire, her foot has trodden on many a venerable throne unjustly thrown down, and her skirts have been dabbled with 'the blood of poor innocents,' splashed there with

her armed hoof. Be it so!—Still! ‘Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee.’ Still—‘we are debtors both to the Greek and barbarian,’ and all the more debtors because of ills inflicted. God has laid on us a solemn responsibility. Over all the dust of base intrigues, and the smoke of bloody battles, and the hubbub of busy commerce, His hand has been working, and though we have been sinful, He has given us a place and a power, mighty and awful. We have received these not for our own glory, not that we should boast of our dominion, not that we should gather tribute of gain and glory from subject peoples, not even that we should carry to them the great though lesser blessings of language, united order, peaceful commerce, sway over brute nature, but that we should give them what will make them men—Christ.

We have a work to do, an awful work. To us all as Christians, to us especially as citizens of this land and members of this race, to us and to our brethren across the Atlantic the message comes, by our history, our manners, etc., as plainly as if it were written in every wave that beats around our coast. ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.’

II. God lays upon us special missionary work by the special characteristics of the times.

‘Such a time as this!’ Was there ever such a time?

Look at the condition of heathenism. It is everywhere tottering. ‘The idols are on the beasts, Bel boweth down.’ The grim gods sit half famished already. There is a crack in every temple wall. Mahommedanism, Buddhism, Brahminism—they are none of them progressive. They are none of them vital. Think how only the Gospel outleaps space and time. How all these systems are of time and devoured

by it, as Saturn eats his own children. They are of the things that can be shaken, and their being shaken makes more certain the remaining of the things that cannot be shaken.

Look at the fields open. India, China, Japan, Africa, in a word, 'The field is the world' in a degree in which it never was before. 'Such a time'—a time of seething, and we can determine the cosmos; a plastic time, and we can mould it; it is a deluge, push the ark boldly out and ransom some.

III. If we neglect the voice of God's providence, harm comes on us.

The gifts unimproved are apt to be lost. One knows not all the conditions on which England holds her sway, nor do we fathom the strange way in which spiritual characteristics are inwrought with material interests. But we believe in a providential government of the world, and of this we may be very sure, that all advantages not used for God are held by a very precarious tenure.

The fact is that selfishness is the ruin of any people. When you have a 'Christian' nation not using their position for God's glory, they are using it for their own sakes; and that indicates a state of mind which will lead to numberless other evils in their relation to men, many of which have a direct tendency to rob them of their advantages. For instance, a selfish nation will never hold conquests with a firm grasp. If we do not bind subject peoples to us by benefits, we shall repel them by hatreds. Think of India and its lessons, or of South Africa and its. We have seen the tide of material prosperity ebb away from many a nation and land, and I for my part believe in the Hand of God in history, and believe that the tide follows the motions of the heavens.

The history of the Jewish people is not an exception to the laws of God's government of the world, but a specimen of it. They who were made a hearth in which the embers of divine truth were kept in a dark world, when they began to think that they had the truth in order that they might be different from other people, and forgot that they were different from others in order that they might first preserve and then impart the truth to all, lost the light and heat of it, stiffened into formal hypocrisy and malice and all uncharitableness, and then the Roman sword smote their national life in twain.

Whatever is not used for God becomes a snare first, then injures the possessors, and tends to destroy the possessors. The march of Providence goes on. Its purposes will be effected. Whatever stands in the way will be mowed remorselessly down, if need be. Helps that have become hindrances will go. The kingdoms of this world will have to fall; and if we are not helping and hastening the coming of the Lord we shall be destroyed by the brightness of His coming. The chariot rolls on. For men and for nations there is only the choice of yoking themselves to the car, and finding themselves borne along rather than bearing it, and partaking the triumph, or of being crushed beneath its awful wheels as they bound along their certain road, bearing Him who rides 'forth prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness.'

IV. Though we be unfaithful, God's purpose of mercy to the world shall be accomplished.

'Deliverance and enlargement shall arise from another place.' So it is certain that God from eternity has willed that all flesh should see His salvation. He loves the heathen better than we do. Christ has

died not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. God hath made of one blood all nations of men. The race is one in its need. The race is one in its goal. The Gospel is fit for all men. The Gospel is preached to all men. The Gospel shall yet be received by a world, and from every corner of a believing earth will rise one roll of praise to one Father, and the race shall be one in its hopes, one in its Lord, one in faith, one in baptism, one in one God and Father of us all. That grand unity shall certainly come. That true unity and fraternity shall be realised. The blissful wave of the knowledge of the Lord shall cover and hide and flow rejoicingly over all national distinctions. 'In that day Israel shall be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.'

This is as certain as the efficacy of a Saviour's blood can make it, as certain as the universal adaptation and design of a preached Gospel can make it, as certain as the oneness of human nature can make it, as certain as the power of a Comforter who shall convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and judgment can make it, as certain as the misery of man can make it, as certain as the promises of God who cannot lie can make it, as certain as His faithfulness who hangs the rainbow in the heavens and enters into an everlasting covenant with all the earth can make it.

And this accumulation of certainties does not depend on the faithfulness of men. In the width of that mighty result the failure of some single agent may be eliminated. Nay, more, though all men failed, God hath instruments, and will use them Himself, if need were.

Only we may share the triumph and partake of the blessed result. Decide for yourself, what share you will



have in that marvellous day. Let your work be such as that it shall abide. Stonehenge, cathedrals, temples stand when all else has passed away. Work for God abides and outlasts everything beside, and the smallest service for Him is only made to flash forth light by the glorifying and revealing fires of that awful day which will burn up the wood, the hay, and the stubble, and flow with beautifying brightness and be flashed back with double splendour from 'the gold, the silver, and the precious stones,' the abiding workmanship of devout hearts in that everlasting tabernacle which shall not be taken down, the ransomed souls builded together, ransomed by our preaching, and 'builded up together for a temple of God by the Spirit.'

### THE NET BROKEN

'And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4. Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king, 5. And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: 6. For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred? 7. Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen, and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. 8. Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse. 15. And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16. The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. 17. And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.'—ESTHER viii. 3-8, 15-17.

THE spirit of this passage may perhaps be best caught by taking the three persons appearing in it, and the One who does not appear, but acts unseen through them all.

I. The heroine of the whole book and of this chapter is Esther, one of the sweetest and noblest of the women of Scripture. The orphan girl who had grown up into beauty under the care of her uncle Mordecai, and was lifted suddenly from sheltered obscurity into the 'fierce light that beats upon a throne,' like some flower culled in a shady nook and set in a king's bosom, was true to her childhood's protector and to her people, and kept her sweet, brave gentleness unspoiled by the rapid elevation which ruins so many characters. Her Jewish name of Hadassah ('myrtle') well befits her, for she is clothed with unostentatious beauty, pure and fragrant as the blossoms that brides twine in their hair. But, withal, she has a true woman's courage which is always ready to endure any evil and dare any danger at the bidding of her heart. She took her life in her hand when she sought an audience of Ahasuerus uninvited, and she knew that she did. Nothing in literature is nobler than her quiet words, which measure her danger without shrinking, and front it without heroics: 'If I perish, I perish!'

The danger was not past, though she was queen and beloved; for a despot's love is a shifting sand-bank, which may yield anchorage to-day, and to-morrow may be washed away. So she counted not her life dear unto herself when, for the second time, as in our passage, she ventured, uninvited, into the king's presence. The womanly courage that risks life for love's sake is nobler than the soldier's that feels the lust of battle maddening him.

Esther's words to the king are full of tact. She begins with what seems to have been the form of address prescribed by custom, for it is used by her in her former requests (chap. v. 8; vii. 3). But she adds a

variation of the formula, tinged with more personal reference to the king's feeling towards her, as well as breathing entire submission to his estimate of what was fitting. 'If the thing seem right before the king,' appeals to the sense of justice that lay dormant beneath the monarch's arbitrary will; 'and I be pleasing in his eyes,' drew him by the charm of her beauty. She avoided making the king responsible for the plot, and laid it at the door of the dead and discredited Haman. It was his device, and since he had fallen, his policy could be reversed without hurting the king's dignity. And then with fine tact, as well as with a burst of genuine feeling, she flings all her personal influence into the scale, and seeks to move the king, not by appeals to his justice or royal duty, but to his love for her, which surely could not bear to see her suffer. One may say that it was a low motive to appeal to, to ask the despot to save a people in order to keep one woman from sorrow; and so it was. It was Ahasuerus's fault that such a reason had more weight with him than nobler ones. It was not Esther's that she used her power over him to carry her point. She used the weapons that she had, and that she knew would be efficacious. The purpose for which she used them is her justification.

Esther may well teach her sisters to-day to be brave and gentle, to use their influence over men for high purposes of public good, to be the inspirers of their husbands, lovers, brothers, for all noble thinking and doing; to make the cause of the oppressed their own, to be the apostles of mercy and the hinderers of wrong, to keep true to their early associations if prosperity comes to them, and to cherish sympathy with their nation so deep that they cannot 'endure to see the evil

that shall come unto them' without using all their womanly influence to avert it.

II. Ahasuerus plays a sorry part beside Esther. He knows no law but his own will, and that is moved, not by conscience or reason, but by ignoble passions and sensual desires. He tosses his subjects' lives as trivial gifts to any who ask for them. Haman's wife knew that he had only to 'speak to the king,' and Mordecai would be hanged; Haman had no difficulty in securing the royal mandate for the murder of all the Jews. Sated with the indulgence of low desires, he let all power slip from his idle hands, and his manhood was rotted away by wallowing in the pigsty of voluptuousness. But he was tenacious of the semblance of authority, and demanded the appearance of abject submission from the 'servants' who were his masters. He yielded to Esther's prayer as lightly as to Haman's plot. Whether the Jews were wiped out or not mattered nothing to him, so long as he had no trouble in the affair.

To shift all responsibility off his own shoulders on to somebody else's was his one aim. He was as untrue to his duty when he gave his signet to Mordecai, and bade him and Esther do as they liked, as when he had given it to Haman. And with all this slothful indifference to his duty, he was sensitive to etiquette, and its cobwebs held him whom the cords of his royal obligations could not hold. It mattered not to him that the edict which he allowed Mordecai to promulgate practically lit the flames of civil war. He had washed his hands of the whole business.

It is a hideous picture of an Eastern despot, and has been said to be unhistorical and unbelievable. But the world has seen many examples of rulers whom the

possession of unlimited and irresponsible power has corrupted in like fashion. And others than rulers may take the warning that to live to self is the mother of all sins and crimes; that no man can safely make his own will and his own passions his guides; that there is no slavery so abject as that of the man who is tyrannised by his lower nature; that there is a temptation besetting us all to take the advantages and neglect the duties of our position, and that to yield to it is sure to end in moral ruin. We are all kings, even if our kingdom be only our own selves, and we shall rule wisely only if we rule as God's viceroys, and think more of duty than of delight.

III. Mordecai is a kind of duplicate of Joseph, and embodies valuable lessons. Contented acceptance of obscurity and neglect of his services, faithfulness to his people and his God in the foul atmosphere of such a court, wise reticence, patient discharge of small duties, undoubting hope when things looked blackest fed by steadfast faith in God, unchangedness of character and purpose when lifted to supreme dignity, the use of influence and place, not for himself, but for his people,—all these are traits which may be imitated in any life. We should be the same men, whether we sit unnoticed among the lackeys at the gate, or are bearing the brunt of the hatred of powerful foes, or are clothed 'in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold.' These gauds were nothing to Mordecai, and earthly honours should never turn our heads. He valued power because it enabled him to save his brethren, and we should cultivate the same spirit. The political world, with its fierce struggles for personal ends, its often disregard of the public good, and its use of place and power for 'making a pile' or helping rela-

tions up, would be much the better for some infusion of the spirit of Mordecai.

IV. But we must not look only at the visible persons and forces. This book of Esther does not say much about God, but His presence broods over it all, and is the real spring that moves the movers that are seen. It is all a lesson of how God works out His purposes through men that seem to themselves to be working out theirs. The king's criminal abandonment to lust and luxury, Haman's meanly personal pique, Esther's beauty, the fall of the favourite, the long past services of Mordecai, even the king's sleepless night, are all threads in the web, and God is the weaver. The story raises the whole question of the standing miracle of the co-existence and co-operation of the divine and the human. Man is free and responsible, God is sovereign and all-pervading. He 'makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the remainder thereof He girdeth Himself.' To-day, as then, He is working out His deep designs through men whom He has raised up, though they have not known Him. Amid the clash of contending interests and worldly passions His solemn purpose steadily advances to its end, like the irresistible ocean current, which persists through all storms that agitate the surface, and draws them into the drift of its silent trend. Ahasuerus, Haman, Esther, Mordecai, are His instruments, and yet each of them is the doer of his or her deed, and has to answer to Him for it.

## THE BOOK OF JOB

### SORROW THAT WORSHIPS

**'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'**—  
JOB i. 21.

THIS book of Job wrestles with the problem of the meaning of the mystery of sorrow. Whether history or a parable, its worth is the same, as tortured hearts have felt for countless centuries, and will feel to the end. Perhaps no picture that was ever painted is grander and more touching than that of the man of Uz, in the antique wealth and happiness of his brighter days, rich, joyful, with his children round him, living in men's honour, and walking upright before God. Then come the dramatic completeness and suddenness of his great trials. One day strips him of all, and stripped of all he rises to a loftier dignity, for there is a majesty as well as an isolation in his sorrow.

How many spirits tossed by afflictions have found peace in these words! How many quivering lips have tried to utter their grave, calm accents! To how many of us are they hallowed by memories of times when they stood between us and despair!

They seem to me to say everything that can be said about our trials and losses, to set forth the whole truth of the facts, and to present the whole series of feelings with which good men may and should be exercised.

I. The vindication of sorrow.

He 'rent his clothes'—the signs and tokens of inward desolation and loss.

It is worth our while to stay for one moment with the thought that we are meant to feel grief. God sends sorrows in order that they may pain. Sorrow has its manifold uses in our lives and on our hearts. It is natural. That is enough. God set the fountain of tears in our souls. We are bidden not to 'despise the chastening of the Lord.' It is they who are 'exercised' thereby to whom the chastisement is blessed.

It is sanctioned by Christ. He wept. He bade the women of Jerusalem weep for themselves and for their children.

Religion does not destroy the natural emotions—sorrow as little as any other. It guides, controls, curbs, comforts, and brings blessings out of it. So do not aim at an impossible stoicism, but permit nature to have its way, and look at the picture of this manly sorrow of Job's—calm, silent, unless when stung by the undeserved reproaches of these three 'orthodox liars for God,' and going to God and worshipping.

II. The recognition of loss and sorrow as the law of life.

'Naked came I out of my mother's womb.'

We need not dwell on the figure 'mother,' suggesting the grave as the kindly mother's bosom that gathers us all in, and the thought that perhaps gleams forth that death, too, is a kind of birth.

But the truth picturesquely set forth is just the old and simple one—that *all possessions are transient*.

The naked self gets clothed and lapped round with possessions, but they are all outside of it, apart from its individuality. It *has been* without them. It will



be without them. Death at the end will rob us of them all.

The inevitable law of loss is fixed and certain. We are losing something every moment—not only possessions, but all our dearest ties are knit but for a time, and sure to be snapped. They go, and then after a while we go.

The independence of each soul of all its possessions and relations is as certain as the loss of them. They may go and we are made naked, but still we exist all the same. We have to learn the hard lesson which sounds so unfeeling, that we can live on in spite of all losses. Nothing, no one, is necessary to us.

All this is very cold and miserable; it is the standing point of law and necessity. An atheist could say it. It is the beginning of the Christian contemplation of life, but only the beginning.

### III. The recognition of God in the law.

‘The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.’ That is a step far beyond the former. To bring in the thought of *the Lord* makes a world of difference.

The tendency is to look only at the second cause. In Job’s case there were two classes of agencies, men, Chaldeans and Sabeans, and natural causes, fire and wind, but he did not stop with these.

The grand corrective of that tendency lies in the full theistic idea, that God is the sole cause of all. The immanence of Deity in all things and events is our refuge from the soul-crushing tyranny of the reign of law.

That devout recognition of God in law is eminently to be made in regard to death, as Job does in the text: ‘The number of his months is with Thee. Death is not any more nor any less under His control

than all other human incidents are. It has no special sanctity, nor abnormally close connection with His will, but it no more is exempt from such connection than all the other events of life. The connection is real. He opens the gate of the grave and no man shuts. He shuts, and no man opens.

Job did not forget the Lord's gifts even while he was writhing under the stroke of His withdrawals. Alas! that it should so often need sorrow to bear into our hearts that we owe all to Him, but even then, if not before, it is well to remember how much good we have received of the Lord, and the remembrance should not be 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow,' but a thankful one.

IV. The thankful resignation to God's loving administration of the law.

The preceding words might be said with mere submission to an irresistible power, but this last sentence climbs to the highest of the true Christian idea. It recognises in loss and sorrow a reason for praise.

Why?

Because we may be sure that all loss is for our good.

Because we may be sure that all loss is from a loving God. In loss of dear ones, *our* gain is in drawing nearer to God, in being taught more to long for heaven. In our relation to them, a loftier love, a hallowing of all the past. *Their* gain is in their entrance to heaven, and all the glory that they have reached.

This blessing of God for loss is not inconsistent with sorrow, but anticipates the future when we shall know all and bless Him for all.

## THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

'Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: 18. For He maketh sore, and bindeth up: He woundeth, and His hands make whole. 19. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. 20. In famine He shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword. 21. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue: neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. 22. At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. 23. For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. 24. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. 25. Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the grass of the earth. 26. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season. 27. Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good.'—JOB v. 17-27.

THE close of the Book of Job shows that his friends' speeches were defective, and in part erroneous. They all proceeded on the assumption that suffering was the fruit of sin—a principle which, though true in general, is not to be unconditionally applied to specific cases. They all forgot that good men might be exposed to it, not as punishment, nor even as correction, but as trial, to 'know what was in their hearts.'

Eliphaz is the best of the three friends, and his speeches embody much permanent truth, and rise, as in this passage, to a high level of literary and artistic beauty. There are few lovelier passages in Scripture than this glowing description of the prosperity of the man who accepts God's chastisements; and, on the whole, the picture is true. But the underlying belief in the uniform coincidence of inward goodness and outward good needs to be modified by the deeper teaching of the New Testament before it can be regarded as covering all the facts of life.

Eliphaz is gathering up, in our passage, the threads of his speech. He bases upon all that he has been

saying the exhortation to Job to be thankful for his sorrows. With a grand paradox, he declares the man who is afflicted to be happy. And therein he strikes an eternally true note. It is good to be made to drink a cup of sorrow. Flesh calls pain evil, but spirit knows it to be good. The list of our blessings is not only written in bright inks, but many are inscribed in black. And the reason why the sad heart should be a happy heart is because, as Eliphaz believed, sadness is God's fatherly correction, intended to better the subject of it. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,' says the Epistle to the Hebrews, in full accord with Eliphaz.

But his well-meant and true words flew wide of their mark, for two reasons. They were chillingly didactic, and it is vinegar upon nitre to stand over an agonised soul and preach platitudes in an unsympathetic voice. And they assumed unusual sin in Job as the explanation of his unparalleled pains, while the prologue tells us that his sufferings were not fruits of his sin, but trials of his righteousness. He was horrified at Job's words, which seemed to him full of rebellion and irreverence; and he made no allowance for the wild cries of an agonised heart when he solemnly warned the sufferer against 'despising' God's chastening. A more sympathetic ear would have detected the accent of faith in the groans.

The collocation, in verse 18, of making sore and binding up, does not merely express sequence, but also purpose. The wounding is in order to healing. The wounds are merciful surgery; and their intention is health, like the cuts that lay open an ulcer, or the scratches for vaccination. The view of suffering in these two verses is not complete, but it goes far

toward completeness in tracing it to God, in asserting its disciplinary intention, in pointing to the divine healing which is meant to follow, and in exhorting to submission. We may recall the beautiful expansion of that exhortation in Hebrews, where 'faint not' is added to 'despise not,' so including the two opposite and yet closely connected forms of misuse of sorrow, according as we stiffen our wills against it, and try to make light of it, or yield so utterly to it as to collapse. Either extreme equally misses the corrective purpose of the grief.

On this general statement follows a charming picture of the blessedness which attends the man who has taken his chastisement rightly. After the thunderstorm come sunshine and blue, and the song of birds. But, lovely as it is, and capable of application in many points to the life of every man who trustfully yields to God's will, it must not be taken as a literally and absolutely true statement of God's dealings with His children. If so regarded, it would hopelessly be shattered against facts; for the world is full of instances of saintly men and women who have not experienced in their outward lives such sunny calm and prosperity stretching to old age as are here promised. Eliphaz is not meant to be the interpreter of the mysteries of Providence, and his solution is decisively rejected at the close. But still there is much in this picture which finds fulfilment in all devout lives in a higher sense than his intended meaning.

The first point is that the devout soul is exempt from calamities which assail those around it. These are such as are ordinarily in Scripture recognised as God's judgments upon a people. Famine and war devastate, but

the devout soul abides in peace, and is satisfied. Now it is not true that faith and submission make a wall round a man, so that he escapes from such calamities. In the supernatural system of the Old Testament such exemptions were more usual than with us, though this very Book of Job and many a psalm show that devout hearts had even then to wrestle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the indiscriminate fall of widespread calamities on the good and bad.

But in its deepest sense (which, however, is not Eliphaz's sense) the faithful man is saved from the evils which he, in common with his faithless neighbour, experiences. Two men are smitten down by the same disease, or lie dying on a battlefield, shattered by the same shell, and the one receives the fulfilment of the promise, 'there shall no evil touch thee,' and the other does not. For the evil in the evil is all sucked out of it, and the poison is wiped off the arrow which strikes him who is united to God by faith and submission. Two women are grinding at the same millstone, and the same blow kills them both; but the one is delivered, and the other is not. They who pass through an evil, and are not drawn away from God by it, but brought nearer to Him, are hid from its power. To die may be our deliverance from death.

Eliphaz's promises rise still higher in verses 22 and 23, in which is set forth a truth that in its deepest meaning is of universal application. The wild beasts of the earth and the stones of the field will be in league with the man who submits to God's will. Of course the beasts come into view as destructive, and the stones as injuring the fertility of the fields. There is, probably, allusion to the story of Paradise and the Fall. Man's relation to nature was disturbed by sin;

it will be rectified by his return to God. Such a doctrine of the effects of sin in perverting man's relation to creatures runs all through Scripture, and is not to be put aside as mere symbolism.

But the large truth underlying the words here is that, if we are servants of God, we are masters of everything. 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' All things serve the soul that serves God; as, on the other hand, all are against him that does not, and 'the stars in their courses fight against' those who fight against Him. All things are ours, if we are Christ's. The many mediæval legends of saints attended by animals, from St. Jerome and his lion downwards to St. Francis preaching to the birds, echo the thoughts here. A gentle, pure soul, living in amity with dumb creatures, has wonderful power to attract them. They who are at peace with God can scarcely be at war with any of God's creatures. Gentleness is stronger than iron bands. 'Cords of love' draw most surely.

Peace and prosperity in home and possessions are the next blessings promised (ver. 24). 'Thou shalt visit [look over] thy household, and shalt miss nothing.' No cattle have strayed or been devoured by evil beasts, or stolen, as all Job's had been. Alas! Eliphaz knew nothing about commercial crises, and the great system of credit by which one scoundrel's fall may bring down hundreds of good men and patient widows, who look over their possessions and find nothing but worthless shares. Yet even for those who find all at once that the herd is cut off from the stall, their tabernacle may still be in peace, and though the fold be empty they may miss nothing, if in the empty place they find God. That is what Christians may make out of

the words; but it is not what was originally meant by them.

In like manner the next blessing, that of a numerous posterity, does not depend on moral or religious condition, as Eliphaz would make out, and in modern days is not always regarded as a blessing. But note the singular heartlessness betrayed in telling Job, all whose flocks and herds had been carried off, and his children laid dead in their festival chamber, that abundant possessions and offspring were the token of God's favour. The speaker seems serenely unconscious that he was saying anything that could drive a knife into the tortured man. He is so carried along on the waves of his own eloquence, and so absorbed in stringing together the elements of an artistic whole, that he forgets the very sorrows which he came to comfort. There are not a few pious exhorters of bleeding hearts who are chargeable with the same sin. The only hand that will bind up without hurting is a hand that is sympathetic to the finger-tips. No eloquence or poetic beauty or presentation of undeniable truths will do as substitutes for that.

The last blessing promised is that which the Old Testament places so high in the list of good things—long life. The lovely metaphor in which that promise is couched has become familiar to us all. The ripe corn gathered into a sheaf at harvest-time suggests festival rather than sadness. It speaks of growth accomplished, of fruit matured, of the ministries of sun and rain received and used, and of a joyful gathering into the great storehouse. There is no reference in the speech to the uses of the sheaf after it is harvested, but we can scarcely avoid following its history a little farther than the 'grave' which to Eliphaz seems the



garner. Are all these matured powers to have no field for action? Were all these miracles of vegetation set in motion only in order to grow a crop which should be reaped, and there an end? What is to be done with the precious fruit which has taken so long time and so much cultivation to grow? Surely it is not the intention of the Lord of the harvest to let it rot when it has been gathered. Surely we are grown here and ripened and carried hence for something.

But that is not in our passage. This, however, may be drawn from it—that maturity does not depend on length of days; and, however Eliphaz meant to promise long life, the reality is that the devout soul may reckon on complete life, whether it be long or short. God will not call His children home till their schooling is done; and, however green and young the corn may seem to our eyes, He knows which heads in the great harvest-field are ready for removal, and gathers only these. The child whose little coffin may be carried under a boy's arm may be ripe for harvesting. Not length of days, but likeness to God, makes maturity; and if we die according to the will of God, it cannot but be that we shall come to our grave in a full age, whatever be the number of years carved on our tombstones.

The speech ends with a somewhat self-complacent exhortation to the poor, tortured man: 'We have searched it, so it is.' We wise men pledge our wisdom and our reputation that this is true. Great is authority. An ounce of sympathy would have done more to commend the doctrine than a ton of dogmatic self-confidence. 'Hear it, and know thou it for thyself.' Take it into thy mind. Take it into thy mind and heart,

and take it for thy good. It was a frosty ending, exasperating in its air of patronage, of superior wisdom, and in its lack of any note of feeling. So, of course, it set Job's impatience alight, and his next speech is more desperate than his former. When will well-meaning comforters learn not to rub salt into wounds while they seem to be dressing them?

## TWO KINDS OF HOPE

'Whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider's web.'—JOB viii. 14.

'And hope maketh not ashamed.'—ROMANS v. 5.

THESE two texts take opposite sides. Bildad was not the wisest of Job's friends, and he gives utterance to solemn commonplaces with partial truth in them. In the rough it is true that the hope of the ungodly perishes, and the limits of the truth are concealed by the splendour of the imagery and the perfection of artistic form in which the well-worn platitude is draped. The spider's web stretched glittering in the dewy morning on the plants, shaking its threaded tears in the wind, the flag in the dry bed of a nullah withering while yet green, the wall on which leaning a man will fall, are vivid illustrations of hopes that collapse and fail. But my other text has to do with hopes that do not fail. Paul thinks that he knows of hope that maketh not ashamed, that is, which never disappoints. Bildad was right if he was thinking, as he was, of hopes fixed on earth; the Apostle was right, for he was thinking of hopes set on God. It is a commonplace that 'hope springs immortal in the human breast'; it is equally a commonplace that hopes are

disappointed. What is the conclusion from these two universal experiences? Is it the cynical one that it is all illusion, or is it that somewhere there must be an object on which hope may twine its tendrils without fear? God has given the faculty, and we may be sure that it is not given to be for ever balked. We must hope. Our hope may be our worst enemy; it may and should be our purest joy.

Let us then simply consider these two sorts of hope, the earthly and the heavenly, in their working in the three great realms of life, death, and eternity.

### I. In life.

The faculty is inseparable from man's consciousness of immortality and of an indefinitely expansible nature which ever makes him discontented with the present. It has great purposes to perform in strengthening him for work, in helping him over sorrows, in making him buoyant and elastic, in painting for him the walls of the dungeon, and hiding for him the weight of the fetters.

But for what did he receive this great gift? Mainly that he might pass beyond the temporal and hold converse with the skies. Its true sphere is the unseen future which is at God's right hand.

We may run a series of antitheses, *e.g.*—

Earthly hope is so uncertain that its larger part is often fear.

Heavenly hope is fixed and sure. It is as certain as history.

Earthly hope realised is always less blessed than we expected. How universal the experience that there is little to choose between a gratified and a frustrated hope! The wonders inside the caravan are never so wonderful as the canvas pictures outside.

Heavenly hopes ever surpass the most rapturous anticipation. 'The half hath not been told.'

Earthly hopes are necessarily short-winged. They are settled one way or another, and sink hull down below our horizon.

Heavenly hope sets its object far off, and because a lifetime only attains it in part, it blesses a lifetime and outlasts it.

## II. Hope in death.

That last hour ends for us all alike our earthly joys and relations. The slow years slip away, and each bears with it hopes that have been outlived, whether fulfilled or disappointed. One by one the lights that we kindle in our hall flicker out, and death quenches the last of them. But there is one light that burns on clear through the article of death, like the lamp in the magician's tomb. 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' We can each settle for ourselves whether we shall carry that radiant angel with her white wings into the great darkness, or shall sadly part with her before we part with life. To the earthly soul that last earthly hour is a black wall beyond which it cannot look. To the God-trusting soul the darkness is peopled with bright-faced hopes.

## III. Hope in eternity.

It is not for our tongues to speak of what must, in the natural working out of consequences, be the ultimate condition of a soul which has not set its hopes on the God who alone is the right Object of the blessed but yet awful capacity of hoping, when all the fleeting objects which it sought as solace and mask of its own true poverty are clean gone from its grasp. Dante's tremendous words are more than enough to move wholesome horror in any thinking

soul: 'Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here. They are said to be unfeeling, grim, and mediæval, incredible in this enlightened age; but is there any way out of them, if we take into account what our nature is moulded to need and cling to, and what 'godless' men have done with it?

But let us turn to the brighter of these texts. 'Hope maketh not ashamed.' There will be an internal increase of blessedness, power, purity in that future, a fuller possession of God, a reaching out after completer likeness to Him. So if we can think of days in that calm state where time will be no more, 'to-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant,' and the angel Hope, who kept us company through all the weary marches of earth, will attend on us still, only having laid aside the uncertainty that sometime veiled her smiles, but retaining all the buoyant eagerness for the ever unfolding wonders which gave us courage and cheer in the days of our flesh.

## JOB'S QUESTION, JESUS' ANSWER

'If a man die, shall he live again?'—JOB xiv. 14.

'... I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'—JOHN xi. 25, 26.

JOB'S question waited long for an answer. Weary centuries rolled away; but at last the doubting, almost despairing, cry put into the mouth of the man of sorrows of the Old Testament is answered by the Man of Sorrows of the New. The answer in words is this second text which may almost be supposed to allude to the ancient question. The answer, in fact, is the resurrection of Christ. Apart from this answer there is none.

So we may take these two texts to help us to grasp more clearly and feel more profoundly what the world owes to that great fact which we are naturally led to think of to-day.

I. The ancient and ever returning question.

The Book of Job is probably a late part of the Old Testament. It deals with problems which indicate some advance in religious thought. Solemn and magnificent, and for the most part sad; it is like a Titan struggling with large problems, and seldom attaining to positive conclusions in which the heart or the head can rest in peace. Here all Job's mind is clouded with a doubt. He has just given utterance to an intense longing for a life beyond the grave. His abode in Sheol is thought of as in some sense a breach in the continuity of his consciousness, but even that would be tolerable, if only he could be sure that, after many days, God would remember him. Then that longing gives way before the torturing question of the text, which dashes aside the tremulous hope with its insistent interrogation. It is not denial, but it is a doubt which palsies hope. But though he has no certainty, he cannot part with the possibility, and so goes on to imagine how blessed it would be if his longing were fulfilled. He thinks that such a renewed life would be like the 'release' of a sentry who had long stood on guard; he thinks of it as his swift, joyous 'answer' to God's summons, which would draw him out from the sad crowd of pale shadows and bring him back to warmth and reality. His hope takes a more daring flight still, and he thinks of God as yearning for His creature, as His creature yearns for Him, and having 'a desire to the work of His hands,' as if His heaven would be incomplete without His servant. But the

rapture and the vision pass, and the rest of the chapter is all clouded over, and the devout hope loses its light. Once again it gathers brightness in the twenty-first chapter, where the possibility flashes out starlike, that 'after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.'

These fluctuations of hope and doubt reveal to us the attitude of devout souls in Israel at a late era of the national life. And if they show us their high-water mark, we need not suppose that similar souls outside the Old Testament circle had solid certainty where these had but a variable hope. We know how large a development the doctrine of a future life had in Assyria and in Egypt, and I suppose we are entitled to say that men have always had the idea of a future. They have always had the thought, sometimes as a fear, sometimes as a hope, but never as a certainty. It has lacked not only certainty but distinctness. It has lacked solidity also, the power to hold its own and sustain itself against the weighty pressure of intrusive things seen and temporal.

But we need not go to the ends of the earth or to past generations for examples of a doubting, superficial hold of the truth that man lives through death and after it. We have only to look around us, and, alas! we have only to look within us. This age is asking the question again, and answering it in many tones, sometimes of indifferent disregard, sometimes flaunting a stark negative without reasoned foundation, sometimes with affirmatives with as little reason as these negatives. The modern world is caught in the rush and whirl of life, has its own sorrows to front, its own battles to fight, and large sections of it have never come as near an answer to Job's question as Job did.

## II. Christ's all-sufficing answer.

He gave it there, by the grave of Lazarus, to that weeping sister, but He spoke these great words of calm assurance to all the world. One cannot but note the difference between His attitude in the presence of the great Mystery and that of all other teachers. How calmly, certainly, and confidently He speaks!

Mark that Jesus, even at that hour of agony, turns Martha's thoughts to Himself. What He is is the all-important thing for her to know. If she understands Him, life and death will have no insoluble problems nor any hopelessness for her. 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' She had risen in her grief to a lofty height in believing that 'even now'—at this moment when help is vain and hope is dead—'whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee,' but Jesus offers to her a loftier conception of Him when He lays a sovereign hand on resurrection and life, and discloses that both inhere in Him, and from Him flow to all who shall possess them. He claims to have in Himself the fountain of life, in all possible senses of the word, as well as in the special sense relevant at that sad hour. Further, He tells Martha that by faith in Him any and all may possess that life. And then He majestically goes on to declare that the life which He gives is immune from, and untouched by, death. The believer shall live though he dies, the living believer shall never die. It is clear that, in these two great statements, to die is used in two different meanings, referring in the former case to the physical fact, and in the latter carrying a heavier weight of significance, namely the pregnant sense which it usually has in this Gospel, of separation from God and consequently from the true life of the soul. Physical death is not the termination



of human life. The grim fact touches only the surface life, and has nothing to do with the essential, personal being. He that believes on Jesus, and he only, truly lives, and his union with Jesus secures his possession of that eternal life, which victoriously persists through the apparent, superficial change which men call death. Nothing dies but the death which surrounds the faithful soul. For it to die is to live more fully, more triumphantly, more blessedly. So though the act of physical death remains, its whole character is changed. Hence the New Testament euphemisms for death are much more than euphemisms. Men christen it by names which drape its ugliness, because they fear it so much, but Faith can play with Leviathan, because it fears it not at all. Hence such names as 'sleep,' 'exodus,' are tokens of the victory won for all believers by Jesus. He will show Martha the hope for all His followers which begins to dawn even in the calling of her brother back from the grip of death. And He shows us the great truth that His being the 'Life' necessarily involved His being also the 'Resurrection,' for His life-communicating work could not be accomplished till His all-quickenng vitality had flowed over into, and flooded with its own conquering tides, not only the spirit which believes but its humble companion, the soul, and its yet humbler, the body. A bodily life is essential to perfect manhood, and Jesus will not stay His hand till every believer is full-summed in all his powers, and is perfect in body, soul, and spirit, after the image of Him who redeemed Him.

### III. The pledge for the truth of the answer.

The words of Jesus are only words. These precious words, spoken to that one weeping sister in a little Jewish village, and which have brought hope to millions

ever since, are as baseless as all the other dreams and longings of the heart, unless Jesus confirms them by fact. If He did not rise from the dead, they are but another of the noble, exalted, but futile delusions of which the world has many others. If Christ be not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness; His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered. If Christ be not risen, the hopeless colloquy between Jehovah and the prophet sums up all that can be said of the future life: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord God, Thou knowest!'

But Christ's resurrection is a fact which, taken in connection with His words while on earth, endorses these and establishes His claims to be the Declarer of the name of God, the Saviour of the world. It gives us demonstration of the continuity of life through and after death. Taken along with His ascension, which is but, so to speak, the prolongation of the point into a line, it declares that a glorified body and an abode in a heavenly home are waiting for all who by faith become here partakers in Jesus and are quickened by sharing in His life.

So in despite of sense and doubt and fear, notwithstanding teachers who, like the supercilious philosophers on Mars Hill, mock when they hear of a resurrection from the dead, we should rejoice in the great light which has shined into the region of the shadow of death, we should clasp His divine and most faithful answer to that old, despairing question, as the anchor of our souls, and lift up our hearts in thanksgiving in the triumphant challenge, 'O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?'

## KNOWLEDGE AND PEACE

'Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace : thereby good shall come unto thee.'—JOB xxii. 21.

IN the sense in which the speaker meant them, these words are not true. They mean little more than 'It pays to be religious.' What kind of notion of acquaintance with God Eliphaz may have had, one scarcely knows, but at any rate, the whole meaning of the text on his lips is poor and selfish.

The peace promised is evidently only outward tranquillity and freedom from trouble, and the good that is to come to Job is plainly mere worldly prosperity. This strain of thought is expressed even more clearly in that extraordinary bit of bathos, which with solemn irony the great dramatist who wrote this book makes this Eliphaz utter immediately after the text, 'The Almighty shall be thy defence and—thou shalt have plenty of silver !' It has not been left for commercial Englishmen to recommend religion on the ground that it produces successful merchants and makes the best of both worlds.

These friends of Job's all err in believing that suffering is always and only the measure of sin, and that you can tell a man's great guilt by observing his great sorrows. And so they have two main subjects on which they preach at their poor friend, pouring vitriol into his wounds : first, how wicked he must be to be so haunted by sorrows ; second, how surely he will be delivered if he will only be religious after their pattern, that is, speak platitudes of conventional devotion and say, I submit.

This is the meaning of our text as it stands. But we

may surely find a higher sense in which it is true and take that to heart.

I. What is acquainting oneself with God?

The first thing to note is that this acquaintance depends on us. So then there must have been a previous objective manifestation on His part. Of course there must be a God to know, and there must be a way of knowing Him. For us Jesus Christ is the Revealer. What men know of God apart from Him is dim, shadowy, indistinct; it lacks certainty, and so is not knowledge. I venture to say that there is nothing between cultivated men and the loss of certain knowledge of God and conviction of His Being, but the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. The Christ reveals the inmost character of God, and that not in words but in deeds. Without Him no man knows God; 'No man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him.'

So then the objective revelation having been made, we must on our part embrace that revelation as ours. The act of so accepting begins with the familiar act of faith, which includes both an exercise of the understanding, as it embraces the facts of Christ's revelation of the Father, and of the will as it casts itself upon and submits to Him. But that exercise of faith is but the point which has to be drawn out into a golden line, woven into the whole length of a life. And it is in the continuity of that line that the average Christian so sadly fails, and because of that failure his acquaintance with God is so distant. How little time or thought we give to the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ! We must be on intimate terms with Him. To know God, as to know a man, we must 'live with' Him, must summer and winter with Him, must bring

Him into the pettinesses of daily life, must let our love set to Him, must be in sympathy with Him, our wills being tuned to make harmony with His, our whole nature being in accord with His. That is work more than enough for a lifetime, enough to task it, enough to bless it.

## II. The peace of acquaintance with God.

Eliphaz meant nothing more than mere earthly tranquillity and exemption from trouble, but his words are true in a far loftier region.

Knowledge of God as He really is brings peace, because His heart is full of love. We do but need to know the actual state of the heart of God towards us to be lapped and folded in peace that nothing outside of God and ourselves can destroy. If we lived under the constant benediction of the deepest truth in the universe, 'God is love,' our peace would be full. That is enough, if we believe it to bring peace. The thought of God which alarms and terrifies cannot be a true thought. But, alas! in proportion as we know ourselves, it becomes difficult to believe that God is love. The stings of conscience hiss prophecies to us of that in God which cannot but be antagonistic to that in us which conscience condemns. Only when our thought of God is drawn from the revelation of Him in Jesus Christ, does it become possible for any man to grasp in one act of his consciousness the conviction, I am a sinner, and the conquering conviction, God is Love, and only Love to me. So the old exhortation, 'Acquaint thyself with God and be at peace,' comes to be in Christian language: 'Behold God in Jesus, and thou shalt possess the peace of God to keep thy heart and mind.'

Knowledge of God gives peace, because in it we find the satisfaction of our whole nature. Thereby we are

freed from the unrest of tumultuous passions and storms of self-will. The internecine war between the better and the worse selves within ceases to rage, and when we have become God's friends, that in us which is meant to rule rules, and that in us which is meant to serve serves, and the inner kingdom is no longer torn asunder but is harmonised with itself.

Knowledge of God brings peace amid all changes, for he who has God for his continual Companion draws little of his supplies from without, and can be tranquil when the seas roar and are troubled and the mountains are cast into the midst of the sea. He bears all his treasures with him, and need fear no loss of any real good. And at last the angel of peace will lead us through the momentary darkness and guide us, after a passing shadow on our path, into 'the land of peace wherein we trusted,' while yet in the land of warfare. Jesus still whispers the ancient salutation with which He greeted the company in the upper room on the evening of the day of resurrection, as He comes to His servants here, and it will be His welcome to them when He receives them above.

### III. The true good from acquaintance with God.

As we have already said, Eliphaz was only thinking, on Old Testament lines, that prosperity in material things was the theocratic reward of allegiance to Jehovah. He was rubbing vitriol into Job's sores, and avowedly regarding him as a fear-inspiring instance of the converse principle. But we have a better meaning breathed into his words, since Jesus has taught us what is the true good for a man all the days of his life. Acquaintance with God is, not merely procures, good. To know Him, to clasp Him to our hearts as our Friend, our Infinite Lover, our Source of all peace and

joy, to mould our wills to His and let Him dominate our whole selves, to seek our wellbeing in Him alone—what else or more can a soul need to be filled with all good? Acquaintance with God brings Him in all His sufficiency to inhabit else empty hearts. It changes the worst, according to the judgment of sense, into the best, transforming sorrow into loving discipline, interpreting its meaning, fitting us to bear it, and securing to us its blessings. To him that is a friend of God,

‘All is right that seems most wrong  
If it be His sweet will.’

To be acquainted with God is the quintessence of good.  
‘This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God,  
and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.’

## WHAT LIFE MAY BE MADE

For then shalt thou have thy delight in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God. 27. Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows. 28. Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways. 29. When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, . . . lifting up; and He shall save the humble person.’—JOB xxii. 26-29.

THESE words are a fragment of one of the speeches of Job’s friends, in which the speaker has been harping on the old theme that affliction is the consequence and evidence of sin. He has much ado to square his theory with facts, and especially with the fact which brought him to Job’s dunghill. But he gets over the difficulty by the simple method of assuming that, since his theory must be true, there must be unknown facts which vindicate it in Job’s case; and since affliction is a sign of sin, Job’s afflictions are proof that he has been a sinner. So he charges him with grossest crimes,

without a shadow of other reason; and after having poured this oil of vitriol into his wounds by way of consolation, he advises him to be good, on the decidedly low and selfish ground that it will pay.

His often-quoted exhortation, 'Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,' is, in his meaning of it, an undisguised appeal to purely selfish considerations, and its promise is not in accordance with facts. Whether that saying is noble and true or ignoble and false, depends on the meanings attached to 'peace' and 'good.' A similar flaw mars the words of our text, as understood by the speaker. But they can be raised to a higher level than that on which he placed them, and regarded as describing the sweet and wonderful prerogatives of the devout life. So understood, they may rebuke and stimulate and encourage us to make our lives conformed to the ideal here.

I. I note, first, that life may be full of delight and confidence in God.

'Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God.' Now when we 'delight' in a thing or a person, we recognise that that thing, or person, fits into a cleft in our hearts, and corresponds to some need in our natures. We not only recognise its good, sweetness, and adaptation to ourselves, but we actually possess in real fruition the sweetness that we recognise, and the good which we apprehend in it. And so these things, the recognition of the supreme sweetness and all-perfect adaptation and sufficiency of God to all that I need; the suppression of tastes and desires which may conflict with that sweetness, and the actual enjoyment and fruition of the sweetness and preciousness which I



apprehend—these things are the very heart of a man's religion. Without delight in God, there is no real religion.

The bulk of men are so sunken and embruted in animal tastes and sensuous desires and fleeting delights, that they have no care for the pure and calm joys which come to those who live near God. But above these stand the men, of whom there are a good many amongst us, whose religion is a matter of fear or of duty or of effort. And above them there stand the men who serve because they trust God, but whose religion is seeking rather than finding, and either from deficient consecration or from false conceptions of Him and of their relation to Him, is overshadowed by an unnatural and unwholesome gloom. And all these kinds of religion, the religion of fear, of duty, of effort, of seeking, and of doubt fighting with faith, are at the best wofully imperfect, and are, some of them, radically erroneous types of the religious life. He is the truly devout man who not only knows God to be great and holy, but feels Him to be sweet and sufficient; who not only fears, but loves; who not only seeks and longs, but possesses; or, in one word, true religion is delighting in God.

So herein is supplied a very sharp test for us. Do our tastes and inclinations set towards Him, and is He better to us than anything beside? Is God to me my dearest faith, the very home of my heart, to which I instinctively turn? Is the brightness of my day the light of His face? Is He the gladness of my joy? Is my Christianity a mill-horse round of service that I am not glad to render? Do I worship because I think it is duty, and are my prayers compulsory and mechanical; or do I worship because my heart goes

out to Him? And is my life calm and sweet because I 'delight in the Lord'?

The next words of my text will help us to answer. 'Thou shalt lift up thy face unto God.' That is a clear enough metaphor to express frank confidence of approach to Him. The head hangs down in the consciousness of demerit and sin. 'Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me,' wailed the Psalmist, 'so that I am not able to look up.' But it is possible for men to go into God's presence with a sense of peace, and to hold up their heads before their Judge and look Him in the eyes and not be afraid. And unless we have that confidence in Him, not because of our merits, but because of His certain love, there will be no 'delight in the Lord.' And there will be no such confidence in Him unless we have 'access with confidence by faith' in that Christ who has taken away our sins, and prepared the way for us into the Father's presence, and by whose death and sacrifice, and by it alone, we sinful men, with open face and uplifted foreheads, can stand to receive upon our visage the full beams of His light, and expatiate and be glad therein. There is no religion worth naming, of which the inmost characteristic is not delight in God. There is no 'delighting in God' possible for sinful men unless they can come to Him with frank confidence, and there is no such confidence possible for us unless we apprehend by faith, and thereby make our own, the great work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. So, secondly, note, such a life of delighting in God will be blessed by the frankest intercourse with Him.

'Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows.' These

are three stages of this blessed communion that is possible for men. And note, prayer is not regarded in this aspect as duty, nor is it even dwelt upon as privilege, but as being the natural outcome and issue of that delighting in God and confident access to Him which have preceded. That is to say, if a man really has set his heart on God, and knows that in Him is all that he needs, then, of course, he will tell Him everything. As surely as the sunshine draws out the odours from the opening petals of the flowers, will the warmth of the felt divine light and love draw from our hearts the sweet confidence, which it is impossible not to give to Him in whom we delight.

If you have to be driven to prayer by a sense of duty, and if there be no impulse in your heart whispering ever to you, 'Tell your Love about it!' you have much need to examine into the reality, and certainly into the depth of your religion. For as surely as instinctive impulse, which needs no spurring from conscience or will, leads us to breathe our confidences to those that we love best, and makes us restless whilst we have a secret hid from them, so surely will a true love to God make it the most natural thing in the world to put all our circumstances, wants, and feeling into the shape of prayers. They may be in briefest words. They may scarcely be vocalised at all, but there will be, if there be a true love to Him, an instinctive turning to Him in every circumstance; and the single-worded cry, if it be no more, for help is sufficient. The arrow may be shot towards Heaven, though it be but slender and short, and it will reach its goal.

For my text goes on to the second stage, 'He shall hear thee.' That was not true as Eliphaz meant it.

But it is true if we remember the preceding conditions. The fundamental passage, which I suppose underlies part, at least, of our text, is that great word in the psalm, 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Does that mean that if a man loves God he may get everything he wants? Yes! and No! If it is supposed to mean that our religion is a kind of key to God's storehouse, enabling us to go in there and rifle it at our pleasure, then it is not true; if it means that a man who delights himself in God will have his supreme desire set upon God, and so will be sure to get it, then it is true. Fulfil the conditions and you are sure of the promise. If our prayer in its deepest essence be 'Not my will, but Thine,' it will be answered. When the desires of our heart are for God, and for conformity to His will, as they will be when we 'delight ourselves in Him,' then we get our heart's desires. There is no promise of our being able to impose our wills upon God, which would be a calamity, and not a blessing, but a promise that they who make Him their joy and their desire will never be defrauded of their desire nor robbed of their joy.

And so the third stage of this frank intercourse comes. 'Thou shalt pay thy vows.' All life may become a thank-offering to God for the benefits that have flowed unceasing from His hands. First a prayer, then the answer, then the rendered thank-offering. Thus, in swift alternation and reciprocity, is carried on the commerce between Heaven and earth, between man and God. The desires rise to Heaven, but Heaven comes down to earth first; and prayer is not the initial stage, but the second, in the process. God first gives His promise, and the best prayer is the catching

up of God's promise and tossing it back again whence it came. Then comes the second downward motion, which is the answer to prayer, in blessing, and on it follows, finally, the reflection upwards, in thankful surrender and service, of the love that has descended on us, in answer to our desires. So like sunbeams from a mirror, or heat from polished metal, backwards and forwards, in continual alternation and reciprocation of influence and of love, flash and travel bright gleams between the soul and God. 'Truth springs out of the earth, and righteousness looks down from Heaven. Our God shall give that which is good, and the earth shall yield her increase.' Is there any other life of which such alternation is the privilege and the joy?

III. Then thirdly, such a life will neither know failure nor darkness.

'Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee, and the light shall shine upon thy ways.' Then is my will to be omnipotent, and am I to be delivered from the experiences of disappointments and failures and frustrated plans that are common to all humanity, and an essential part of its discipline, because I am a Christian man? Eliphaz may have meant that, but we know something far nobler. Again, I say, remember the conditions precedent. First of all, there must be the delight in God, and the desire towards Him, the submission of the will to Him, and the waiting before Him for guidance. I decree a thing—if I am a true Christian, and in the measure in which I am—only when I am quite sure that God has decreed it. And it is only His decrees, registered in the chancery of my will, of which I may be certain that they shall be established. There will

be no failures to the man whose life's purpose is to serve God, and to grow like Him; but if our purpose is anything less than that, or if we go arbitrarily and self-willedly resolving and saying, 'Thus I will; thus I command; let my will stand instead of all reason, we shall have our contemptuous 'decrees' disestablished many a time. If we run our heads against stone walls in that fashion, the walls will stand, and our heads will be broken. To serve Him and to fall into the line of His purpose, and to determine nothing, nor obstinately want anything until we are sure that it is His will—that is the secret of never failing in what we undertake.

We must understand a little more deeply than we are apt to do what is meant by 'success,' before we predict unfailing success for any man. But if we have obeyed the commandment from the psalm already quoted, which may be again alluded to in the words of my text—'Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him'—we shall inherit the ancient promise, 'and He shall bring it to pass.' 'All things work together for good to them that love God,' and in the measure of our love to Him are our discernment and realisation of what is truly good. Religion gives no screen to keep the weather off us, but it gives us an insight into the truth that storms and rain are good for the only crop that is worth growing here. If we understand what we are here for, we shall be very slow to call sorrow evil, and to crown joy with the exclusive title of blessing and good; and we shall have a deeper canon of interpretation for the words of my text than he who is represented as speaking them ever dreamed of.

So with the promise of light to shine upon our paths.

It is 'the light which never was on sea or land,' and not the material light which sense-bound eyes can see. That may all go. But if we have God in our hearts, there will be a light upon our way 'which knows no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' The Arctic winter, sunless though it be, has a bright heaven radiant with myriad stars, and flashing with strange lights born of no material or visible orb. And so you and I, if we delight ourselves 'in the Lord,' will have an unsetting sun to light our paths; 'and at eventide,' and in the mirkest midnight, 'there will be light' in the darkness.

IV. Lastly, such a life will be always hopeful, and finally crowned with deliverance.

'When they'—that is, the ways that he has been speaking about—'when they are cast down, thou shalt say, Lifting up.' That is an exclamation or a prayer, and we might simply render, 'thou shalt say, Up!' Even in so blessed a life as has been described, times will come when the path plunges downwards into some 'valley of the shadow of death.' But even then the traveller will bate no jot of hope. He will in his heart say 'Up!' even while sense says 'Down!' either as expressing indomitable confidence and good cheer in the face of depressing circumstances, or as pouring out a prayer to Him who 'has showed him great and sore troubles' that He would 'bring him up again from the depths of the earth.' The devout life is largely independent of circumstances, and is upheld and calmed by a quiet certainty that the general trend of its path is upward, which enables it to trudge hopefully down an occasional dip in the road.

Such an obstinate hopefulness and cheery confidence are the natural result of the experiences already de-

scribed in the text. If we delight in God, hold communion with Him and have known Him as answering prayer, prospering our purposes and illuminating our paths, how shall we not hope? Nothing need depress nor perturb those whose joys and treasures are safe above the region of change and loss. If our riches are there where neither moth, rust, nor thieves can reach, our hearts will be there also, and an inward voice will keep singing, 'Lift up your heart.' It is the prerogative of experience to light up the future. It is the privilege of Christian experience to make hope certainty. If we live the life outlined in these verses we shall be able to bring June into December, and feel the future warmth whilst our bones are chilled with the present cold. 'When the paths are made low, thou shalt say, Up!'

And the end will vindicate such confidence. For the issue of all will be, 'He will save the humble person'; namely, the man who is of the character described, and who is 'lowly of eyes' in conscious unworthiness, even while he lifts up his face to God in confidence in his Father's love. The 'saving' meant here is, of course, temporary and temporal deliverance from passing outward peril. But we may permissibly give it wider and deeper meaning. Continuous partial deliverances lead on to and bring about final full salvation.

We read that into the words, of course. But nothing less than a complete and conclusive deliverance can be the legitimate end of the experience of the Christian life here. Absurdity can no further go than to suppose that a soul which has delighted itself in God, and looked in His face with frank confidence, and poured out his desires to Him, and been the recipient of



numberless answers, and the seat of numberless thank-offerings, has travelled along life's common way in cheerful godliness, has had the light of heaven shining on the path, and has found an immortal hope springing as the natural result of present experience, shall at the last be frustrated of all, and lie down in unconscious sleep, which is nothingness. If that were the end of a Christian life, then 'the pillared firmament were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble.' No, no! A heaven of endless blessedness and close communion with God is the only possible ending to the facts of the devout life on earth.

We have such a life offered to us all and made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we may delight ourselves in the Lord, by whom we have 'access with confidence,' who is Himself the light of our hope, the answer of our prayers, the joy of our hearts, and who will 'deliver us from every evil work' as we travel along the road; 'and save us' at last 'into His heavenly kingdom,' where we shall be joined to the Delight of our souls, and drink for evermore of the fountain of life.

### 'THE END OF THE LORD'

'Then Job answered the Lord, and said, 2. I know that Thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from Thee. 3. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. 4. Hear, I beseech Thee, and I will speak: I will demand of Thee, and declare Thou unto me. 5. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. 6. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes. 7. And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath. 8. Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of Me the thing which is right, like My servant Job. 9. So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad

the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went, and did according as the Lord commanded them: the Lord also accepted Job. 10. And the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.—JOB xlii. 1-10.

THE close of the Book of Job must be taken in connection with its prologue, in order to get the full view of its solution of the mystery of pain and suffering. Indeed the prologue is more completely the solution than the ending is; for it shows the purpose of Job's trials as being, not his punishment, but his testing. The whole theory that individual sorrows were the result of individual sins, in the support of which Job's friends poured out so many eloquent and heartless commonplaces, is discredited from the beginning. The magnificent prologue shows the source and purpose of sorrow. The epilogue in this last chapter shows the effect of it in a good man's character, and afterwards in his life.

So we have the grim thing lighted up, as it were, at the two ends. Suffering comes with the mission of trying what stuff a man is made of, and it leads to closer knowledge of God, which is blessed; to lowlier self-estimation, which is also blessed; and to renewed outward blessings, which hide the old scars and gladden the tortured heart.

Job's final word to God is in beautiful contrast with much of his former unmeasured utterances. It breathes lowliness, submission, and contented acquiescence in a providence partially understood. It does not put into Job's mouth a solution of the problem, but shows how its pressure is lightened by getting closer to God. Each verse presents a distinct element of thought and feeling.

First comes, remarkably enough, not what might have been expected, namely, a recognition of God's

righteousness, which had been the attribute impugned by Job's hasty words, but of His omnipotence. God 'can do everything,' and none of His 'thoughts' or purposes can be 'restrained' (Rev. Ver.). There had been frequent recognitions of that attribute in the earlier speeches, but these had lacked the element of submission, and been complaint rather than adoration. Now, the same conviction has different companions in Job's mind, and so has different effects, and is really different in itself. The Titan on his rock, with the vulture tearing at his liver, sullenly recognised Jove's power, but was a rebel still. Such had been Job's earlier attitude, but now that thought comes to him along with submission, and so is blessed. Its recurrence here, as in a very real sense a new conviction, teaches us how old beliefs may flash out into new significance when seen from a fresh point of view, and how the very same thought of God may be an argument for arraigning and for vindicating His providence.

The prominence given, both in the magnificent chapters in which God answers Job out of the whirlwind and in this final confession, to power instead of goodness, rests upon the unspoken principle that 'the divine nature is not a segment, but a circle. Any one divine attribute implies all others. Omnipotence cannot exist apart from righteousness' (Davidson's *Job*, Cambridge Bible for Schools). A mere naked omnipotence is not God. If we rightly understand His power, we can rest upon it as a Hand sustaining, not crushing, us. 'He doeth all things well' is a conviction as closely connected with 'I know that Thou canst do all things' as light is with heat.

The second step in Job's confession is the acknowledgment of the incompleteness of his and all men's

materials and capacities for judging God's providence. Verse 3 begins with quoting God's rebuke (Job xxxviii. 2). It had cut deep, and now Job makes it his own confession. We should thus appropriate as our own God's merciful indictments, and when He asks, 'Who is it?' should answer with lowliness, 'Lord, it is I.' Job had been a critic; he is a worshipper. He had tried to fathom the bottomless, and been angry because his short measuring-line had not reached the depths. But now he acknowledges that he had been talking about what passed his comprehension, and also that his words had been foolish in their rashness.

Is then the solution of the whole only that old commonplace of the unsearchableness of the divine judgments? Not altogether; for the prologue gives, if not a complete, yet a real, key to them. But still, after all partial solutions, there remains the inscrutable element in them. The mystery of pain and suffering is still a mystery; and while general principles, taught us even more clearly in the New Testament than in this book, do lighten the 'weight of all this unintelligible world,' we have still to take Job's language as the last word on the matter, and say, 'How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!'

For individuals, and on the wider field of the world, God's way is in the sea; but that does not bewilder those who also know that it is also in the sanctuary. Job's confession as to his rash speeches is the best estimate of many elaborate attempts to 'vindicate the ways of God to man.' It is better to trust than to criticise, better to wait than to seek prematurely to understand.

Verse 4, like verse 3, quotes the words of God (Job xxxviii. 3; xl. 7). They yield a good meaning, if regarded as a repetition of God's challenge, for the purpose of disclaiming any such presumptuous contest. But they are perhaps better understood as expressing Job's longing, in his new condition of humility, for fuller light, and his new recognition of the way to pierce to a deeper understanding of the mystery, by illumination from God granted in answer to his prayer. He had tried to solve his problem by much, and sometimes barely reverent, thinking. He had racked brain and heart in the effort, but he has learned a more excellent way, as the Psalmist had, who said, 'When I thought, in order to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I.' Prayer will do more for clearing mysteries than speculation, however acute, and it will change the aspect of the mysteries which it does not clear from being awful to being solemn—veils covering depths of love, not clouds obscuring the sun.

The centre of all Job's confession is in verse 5, which contrasts his former and present knowledge of God, as being mere hearsay before, and eyesight now. A clearer understanding, but still more, a sense of His nearness, and an acquaintance at first hand, are implied in the bold words, which must not be interpreted of any outward revelation to sense, but of the direct, full, thrilling consciousness of God which makes all men's words about Him seem poor. That change was the master transformation in Job's case, as it is for us all. Get closer to God, realise His presence, live beneath His eye and with your eyes fixed on Him, and ancient puzzles will puzzle no longer, and wounds will cease to smart, and instead of angry expostulation or

bewildered attempts at construing His dealings, there will come submission, and with submission, peace.

The cure for questionings of His providence is experience of His nearness, and blessedness therein. Things that loomed large dwindle, and dangers melt away. The landscape is the same in shadow and sunshine; but when the sun comes out, even snow and ice sparkle, and tender beauty starts into visibility in grim things. So, if we see God, the black places of life are lighted; and we cease to feel the pressure of many difficulties of speculation and practice, both as regards His general providence and His revelation in law and gospel.

The end of the whole matter is Job's retraction of his words and his repentance. 'I abhor' has no object expressed, and is better taken as referring to the previous speeches than to 'myself.' He means thereby to withdraw them all. The next clause, 'I repent in dust and ashes,' carries the confession a step farther. He recognises guilt in his rash speeches, and bows before his God confessing his sin. Where are his assertions of innocence gone? One sight of God has scattered them, as it ever does. A man who has learned his own sinfulness will find few difficulties and no occasions for complaint in God's dealings with him. If we would see aright the meaning of our sorrows, we must look at them on our knees. Get near to God in heart-knowledge of Him, and that will teach our sinfulness, and the two knowledges will combine to explain much of the meaning of sorrow, and to make the unexplained residue not hard to endure.

The epilogue in prose which follows Job's confession, tells of the divine estimate of the three friends, of Job's sacrifice for them, and of his renewed outward

prosperity. The men who had tried to vindicate God's righteousness are charged with not having spoken that which is right; the man who has passionately impugned it is declared to have thus spoken. No doubt, Eliphaz and his colleagues had said a great many most excellent, pious things, and Job as many wild and untrue ones. But their foundation principle was not a true representation of God's providence, since it was the uniform connection of sin with sorrow, and the accurate proportion which these bore to each other.

Job, on the other hand, had spoken truth in his denials of these principles, and in his longings to have the righteousness of God set in clear relation to his own afflictions. We must remember, too, that the friends were talking commonplaces learned by rote, while Job's words came scalding hot from his heart. Most excellent truth may be so spoken as to be wrong; and it is so, if spoken heartlessly, regardless of sympathy, and flung at sufferers like a stone, rather than laid on their hearts as a balm. God lets a true heart dare much in speech; for He knows that the sputter and foam prove that 'the heart's deeps boil in earnest.'

Job is put in the place of intercessor for the three—a profound humiliation for them and an honour for him. They obeyed at once, showing that they have learned their lesson, as well as Job his. An incidental lesson from that final picture of the sufferer become the priest requiting accusations with intercession, is the duty of cherishing kind feelings and doing kind acts to those who say hard things of us. It would be harder for some of us to offer sacrifices for our Eliphazes than to argue with them. And yet another

is that sorrow has for one of its purposes to make the heart more tender, both for the sorrows and the faults of others.

Note, too, that it was 'when Job prayed for his friends' that the Lord turned his captivity. That is a proverbial expression, bearing witness, probably, to the deep traces left by the Exodus, for reversing calamity. The turning-point was not merely the confession, but the act, of beneficence. So, in ministering to others, one's own griefs may be soothed.

The restoration of outward good in double measure is not meant as the statement of a universal law of Providence, and still less as a solution of the problem of the book. But it is putting the truth that sorrows, rightly borne, yield peaceable fruit at the last, in the form appropriate to the stage of revelation which the whole book represents; that is, one in which the doctrine of immortality, though it sometimes rises before Job's mind as an aspiration of faith, is not set in full light.

To us, living in the blaze of light which Jesus Christ has let into the darkness of the future, the 'end of the Lord' is that heaven should crown the sorrows of His children on earth. We can speak of light, transitory affliction working out an eternal weight of glory. The book of Job is expressing substantially the same expectation, when it paints the calm after the storm and the restoration in double portion of vanished blessings. Many desolate yet trusting sufferers know how little such an issue is possible for their grief, but if they have more of God in clearer sight of Him, they will find empty places in their hearts and homes filled.



## THE PROVERBS

### A YOUNG MAN'S BEST COUNSELLOR

'The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; 2. To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; 3. To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; 4. To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion, 5. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: 6. To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings. 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9. For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. 10. My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. 11. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: 12. Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: 13. We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: 14. Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: 15. My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: 16. For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. 17. (Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird:) 18. And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives. 19. So are the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the life of the owners thereof.'—PROV. i. 1-19.

THIS passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs. It falls into three parts—a statement of the purpose of the book (vs. 1-6); a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to which men ought to listen (vs. 7-9); and an antithetic statement of the voices to which they should be deaf (vs. 10-19).

I. The aim of the book is stated to be twofold—to enable men, especially the young, to 'know wisdom,' and to help them to 'discern the words of understanding'; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be no mistaking seducing words of folly for these.

These two aims are expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in verse 6, while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. 'Righteousness and judgment and equity' are 'wise dealing,' and the end of true wisdom is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing on conduct. But the intellectual progress (and conceit) of to-day will be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book—for the young. Youth, by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for the most part to re-discover its truths for ourselves by our own, often bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient 'wisdom' will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It is the 'wise man' who will 'increase in learning,' the 'man of understanding' who 'attains unto sound counsels.' The treasures are thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on the 'fool,' and it will run off

him like water off a rock, fertilising nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd, practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. 'Godliness hath promise of the life which now is.' The wisdom of the serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent's venom in it. It is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

II. Verses 7-9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to listen to parental instruction. 'My son,' is the address of a teacher to his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic Old Testament designation of religion as 'the fear of Jehovah' corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy One,—that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being and limitations. Therefore is He 'to be had in reverence of all' who would be 'about Him'; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration, trust, and love. The Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men; the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man, Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as 'the love of God'; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because

wisdom is conceived of as God's gift, and the surest way to get it is to 'ask of God' (Jas. i. 5). Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom, inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the epitaph for all such is 'Thou fool!'

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopædias of knowledge, but for want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the beginning of the nation's history, it was not unreasonable to look back for light. Nowadays, a belief's being our fathers' is with many a reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some 'old lamps' better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the exhortation to listen to the 'instruction' (by which is meant, not only teaching by word, but discipline by

act) of their fathers, and to the gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and wreathed chaplets.

III. On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young, is fatal. If we cannot say 'No' to the base, we shall not say 'Yes' to the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all cases substantially the same. 'Precious substance' of one sort or another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement, and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed, and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it—not the false appearance of food which lured the fish—is what sticks in the bleeding mouth.

The teacher goes on, in verses 15 to 19, to supply the truth which the tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The flowery way to which they coax is a way of 'evil'; that should be enough to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong? Verse 17 is ambiguous, but probably the 'net' means the tempters' speech in verses 11 to 14, and the 'bird' is the young man supposed to be addressed. The sense will then be, 'Surely you are not foolish enough to fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so transparent sin!'

Verse 18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is suicide. Who ever breaks God's law slays himself.

What is true about 'covetousness,' as verse 19 tells, is true about all kinds of sin—that it takes away the life of those who yield to it, even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on—that is, eternal death. 'This their way is their folly.' Yet, strange to tell, their posterity 'approve their sayings,' and follow their doings.

## WISDOM'S CALL

'Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: 21. She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying, 22. How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scornors delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? 23. Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. 24. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; 25. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26. I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27. When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: 29. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: 30. They would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. 31. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. 32. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. 33. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.'—PROVERBS 1. 20-33.

OUR passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet entreaty—authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is she? It is easy to say 'a poetical personification,' but that does not add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified Wisdom with God

before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its complete incarnation in a Person who is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God,' and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that 'He does not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets'; for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy, and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear, universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The first step in delivering men from evil—that is, from foolish—courses is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts, and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are must be the accusation of folly. 'When she is come, she will convict the world of sin.'

The three designations of men in verse 22 are probably arranged so as to make a climax. First come 'the simple,' or, as the word means, 'open.' There is a *sancta simplicitas*, a holy ignorance of evil, which is sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as 'innocent of much transgression'; and there



is no more mistaken and usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the Tempter's whisper, which believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come 'scorners,' who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the 'simple' who begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the 'fool,' the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,—a foul compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness, however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech; and the false direction given to love gives a fatal

twist to its corresponding hate, so that the fool detests 'knowledge' as a thief the policeman's lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle character and acts.

Verse 23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible. The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in verse 23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed. Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call of divine Wisdom (and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow), chief of all are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them. To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung out. What is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted. The bustle goes on as before. 'They bought, they sold,' as if no voice had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice peals out again,

but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in verses 24 and 25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is represented as being simple indifference. 'Ye refused,' 'no man regarded,' 'set at nought,' 'would none of'—these are the things which bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and dreadful than the parallel representations in Psalm ii., for there the laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken along with declarations that God **has** 'no pleasure in the death of the sinner,' and to **be** interpreted as indicating, with daring anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the 'destruction,' and the uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Verses 28-31 carry on the picture of too late repentance

and inevitable retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs; for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but are filled with their own devices or counsels. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries, in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character; and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will 'not plough in winter by reason of the cold,' we shall 'beg in harvest and have nothing.'

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the fruits—and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Verses 32 and 33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a great antithesis. 'The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple slays them.' There is allusion to Wisdom's call in verse 23. The simple had turned, but in the wrong direction—away from and not towards her. To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one's face toward destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make our choice of one of two directions for ourselves—either towards God, to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is death. 'The security of fools,' by which is meant, not their safety, but their fancy that they are safe, 'destroys them.' No man is in such danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no sorrow, will have a rude wakening. A moment's heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom's call. Whoever does that will 'dwell safely,' not in fancied but real security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good, and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is our Good, we shall fear no evil.

## THE SECRET OF WELL-BEING

'My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: 2. For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. 3. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: 4. So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. 5. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. 6. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. 7. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil. 8. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. 9. Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: 10. So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.' —PROVERBS iii. 1-10.

THE first ten verses of this passage form a series of five couplets, which enforce on the young various phases of goodness by their tendency to secure happiness or blessedness of various sorts. The underlying axiom is that, in a world ruled by a good Being, obedience must lead to well-being; but while that is in the general true, exceptions do occur, and good men do encounter evil times. Therefore the glowing promises of these verses are followed by two verses which deal with the explanation of good men's afflictions, as being results and tokens of God's fatherly love.

The first couplet is general in character. It inculcates obedience to the precepts of the teacher, and gives as reason the assurance that thereby long life and peace will be secured. True to the Old Testament conception of revelation as a law, the teacher sets obedience in the forefront. He is sure that his teaching contains the sufficient guide for conduct, and coincides with the divine will. He calls, in the first instance, for inward willing acceptance of His commandments; for it is the heart, not primarily the hands, which he desires should 'keep' them. The mother of all graces of conduct is the bowing of the will to divine authority. The will is the man, and where it ceases to lift itself up in self-sacrificing and self-determining rebellion, and dis-

solves into running waters of submission, these will flow through the life and make it pure. To obey self is sin, to obey God is righteousness. The issues of such obedience are 'length of days . . . and peace.'

Even if we allow for the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, it remains true that a life conformed to God's will tends to longevity, and that many forms of sin do shorten men's days. Passion and indulged appetites eat away the very flesh, and many a man's 'bones are full of the sin of his youth.' The profligate has usually 'a short life,' whether he succeeds in making it 'merry' or not.

'Peace' is a wide word, including all well-being. Ease-loving Orientals, especially when living in warlike times, naturally used the phrase as a shorthand expression for all good. Busy Westerns, torn by the distractions and rapid movement of modern life, echo the sigh for repose which breathes in the word. 'There is no joy but calm,' and the sure way to deepest peace is to give up self-will and live in obedience.

The second couplet deals with our relations to one another, and puts forward the two virtues of 'loving-kindness and truth'—that is truth, or faithfulness—as all-inclusive. They are the two which are often jointly ascribed to God, especially in the Psalms. Our attitude to one another should be moulded in God's to us all. The tiniest crystal has the same facets and angles as the largest. The giant hexagonal pillars of basalt, like our Scottish Staffa, are identical in form with the microscopic crystals of the same substance. God is our Pattern; goodness is likeness to Him.

These graces are to be bound about the neck, perhaps as an ornament, but more probably as a yoke by which the harnessed ox draws its burden. If we have them,

they will fit us to bear one another's burdens, and will lead to all human duties to our fellows.

These graces are also to be written on the 'table of the heart'; that is, are to be objects of habitual meditation with aspiration. If so, they will come to sight in life. He who practises them will 'find favour with God and man,' for God looks with complacency on those who display the right attitude to men; and men for the most part treat us as we treat them. There are surly natures which are not won by kindness, like black tarns among the hills, that are gloomy even in sunshine, and requite evil for good; but the most of men reflect our feelings to them.

'Good understanding' is another result. It is 'found' when it is attributed to us, so that the expression substantially means that the possessors of these graces will win the reputation of being really wise, not only in the fallible judgment of men, but before the pure eyes of the all-seeing God. Really wise policy coincides with loving-kindness and truth.

The remaining couplets refer to our relations to God. The New Testament is significantly anticipated in the pre-eminence given to trust; that is, faith. Nor less significant and profound is the association of self-distrust with trust in the Lord. The two things are inseparable. They are but the under and upper sides of one thing, or like the two growths that come from a seed—one striking downwards becomes the root; one piercing upwards becomes the stalk. The double attitude of trust and distrust finds expression in acknowledging Him in all our ways; that is, ordering our conduct under a constant consciousness of His presence, in accordance with His will, and in dependence on His help.



Such a relation to God will certainly, and with no exceptions, issue in His 'directing our paths,' by which is meant that He will be not only our Guide, but also our Roadmaker, showing us the way and clearing obstacles from it. Calm certitude follows on willingness to accept God's will, and whoever seeks only to go where God sends him will neither be left doubtful whither he should go, nor find his road blocked.

The fourth couplet is, in its first part, in inverted parallelism with the third; for it begins with self-distrust, and proceeds thence to 'fear of the Lord,' which corresponds to, and is, in fact, but one phase of, trust in Him. It is the reverent awe which has no torment, and is then purest when faith is strongest. It necessarily leads to departing from evil. Morality has its roots in religion. There is no such magnet to draw men from sin as the happy fear of God, which is likewise faith. Whoever separates devoutness from purity of life, this teacher does not. He knows nothing of religion which permits association with iniquity. Such conduct will tend to physical well-being, and in a deeper sense will secure soundness of life. Godlessness is the true sickness. He only is healthy who has a healthy, because healed, soul.

The fifth couplet appears at first as being a drop to a lower region. A regulation of the Mosaic law may strike some as out of place here. But it is to be remembered that our modern distinction of ceremonial and moral law was non-existent for Israel, and that the command has a wider application than to Jewish tithes. To 'honour God with our substance' is not necessarily to give it away for religious purposes, but to use it devoutly and as He approves.

Christianity has more to say about the distribution,

as well as the acquisition, of wealth, than professing Christians, especially in commercial communities, practically recognise. This precept grips us tight, and is much more than a ceremonial regulation. Many causes besides the devout use of property tend to wealth in our highly artificial state of society. The world tries to get it by shrewdness, unscrupulousness, and by many other vices which are elevated to the rank of virtues; but he who honours the Lord in getting and spending will generally have as much as his true needs and regulated desires require.

### THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM

'My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: 12. For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth. 13. Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. 14. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. 15. She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. 16. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. 17. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. 19. The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath He established the heavens. 20. By His knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. 21. My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: 22. So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. 23. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. 24. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.'—PROVERBS iii. 11-24.

THE repetition of the words 'my son' at the beginning of this passage marks a new section, which extends to verse 20, inclusively, another section being similarly marked as commencing in verse 21. The fatherly counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same ideas, being line upon line. 'To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.' Many strokes drive the nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look

carefully at the section (vers. 11-20), we find in it a central core (vers. 13-18), setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses, inculcating the right acceptance of God's chastisements which are one chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses (vers. 19, 20), which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely, that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are 'instruction' and 'reproof.' The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and assimilated. Grievings and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly loss and bitterness is, 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get Wisdom.' God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, 'My son, despise not the chastening.'

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly love. How many sad hearts in all ages

these few words have calmed and braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words 'despise' and 'be weary' both imply rather rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmitive impatience which gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews, makes the two words express two opposite faults. They 'despise' who steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the pain; they 'faint' who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings, which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section (vers. 13-18),—the praise of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good. 'The man that findeth Wisdom' reminds us of the peasant in Christ's parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the 'merchandise' in verse 14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in verse 13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said, 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' We buy heavenly Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it—that this heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is indeed the only true riches. 'Rubies' is probably rather to be taken as 'corals,' which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and, no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean *viâ* the Red Sea. The word rendered 'things thou canst desire' is better taken as meaning 'jewels.'

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of the best things accordingly? How many so-called Christian parents would think their son mad if he said, 'I do not care about getting rich; my goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom'? How few of us order our lives on the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having

failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery. His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described. The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart. Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days; that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to the former, is wealth and honour—two goods which will attend the long life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found. She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom's hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable. Her ways are pleasantness and peace. 'In keeping'—not *for* keeping—'her commandments is great reward.' Inward delight and deep tranquillity of heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two names for one thing—one taken from consideration of its obligation; the other, from observation of its issues. 'Calm pleasures there abide.' The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ. There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in verse 18: 'She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.' This is a distinct allusion to the narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those

who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word 'life' is here gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom, is Himself 'the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God.' The condition of access to it is 'laying hold' by the outstretched hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition of true blessedness.

Verses 19 and 20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God's Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light, hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ? Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being, whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for evermore.

Verses 21-24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn. They add little to the preceding.



But we may observe the earnest exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, 'as it were, the face of an angel.' Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace. Some good people forget that they are bound to 'adorn the doctrine.' But they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness. Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw 'no beauty that they should desire Him,' in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the divine Father deemed 'fairer than the sons of men'!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm

slumber. 'Whether we sleep or wake, we live' with Him; and, if we do both, sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.

### THE TWO PATHS

'Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. 11. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. 12. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. 13. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. 14. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. 15. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. 16. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. 17. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. 18. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. 19. The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble.'—PROVERBS iv. 10-19.

THIS passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in verse 10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that

obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in verse 11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is 'the way of Wisdom'—that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is *The Devil is an Ass*, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation 'paths of uprightness,' which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom's way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In verse 13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and

its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of 'instruction,' which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away 'instruction,' if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for 'she is thy life,' and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Verses 14 to 17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the 'path of uprightness' or of 'wisdom,' and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is 'the path of the *wicked*,' and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep

it at arm's-length. 'Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say 'No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. 'So did *not* I, because of the fear of God' must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the 'way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can 'turn from' the path of the wicked and 'pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in verses 16 and 17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and 'putting him up to a thing or two,' which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,— 'avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to 'bread' and 'wine' in verse 17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their 'wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their 'violence,' which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may

contrast this foul source of a degraded living with verse 13, where 'instruction' is set forth as 'the life' of the upright.

Verses 18 and 19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase 'the perfect day' might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, 'the steady of the day'—that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. 'How great is that darkness!' It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.

## MONOTONY AND CRISES

When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'—PROVERBS iv. 12.

THE old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the 'way' has a specific designation, 'the way of Wisdom'—that is to say, the way which Wisdom teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism, in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little pleasing difference. 'When thou goest'—that is, the monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily life, the humdrum 'one foot up and another foot down' which makes the most of our days. 'When thou runnest'—that points to the crises, the sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. 'When thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to you the condition, and the sole con-

dition, upon which either of them can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it means for us Christ, 'the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.' And so instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and realise that the writer's visions can only become realities when the serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness took to itself a human Form, and 'the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.'

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, 'the path of Wisdom' assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it *then* come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom, choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the road. If we will do these three things—if we will say to Him, 'Lord, when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious liberty, and what



Thou biddest me do, I do'—if you will further say, 'As Thou art, so am I in the world'—and if you will further say, 'Leave me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child holds on by her mother's skirt or her father's hand,' then, and only then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things—submission of will, conformity of conduct, closeness of companionship—these three things being understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall under the terms of this first promise, 'When thou walkest.' For many miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. 'The trivial round, the common task' make up by far the largest percentage of our lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for? If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field, there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of small, mono-

tonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome, duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that 'when thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.'

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, 'For Thy sake, and unto Thee, I do this'; then, not only will the rough places become plain, and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened.' 'I will make his feet as hind's feet,' says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant, graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and 'thy steps shall not be straitened.'

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise—

viz. if we thus are in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of the road to be restraints. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened'; although there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not narrowing. 'I will walk at liberty, for—I do as I like.' No! that is slavery; but, 'I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts'; and I do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to the way which Thou dost mark out. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened.' So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? 'When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man's life. Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeful, eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases. 'When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.' The greater the speed, the greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus Christ

is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty, in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and hold the nervous creature's head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so He will bring it down to rest in the valley. 'Now unto Him that is able to keep us from stumbling,' as is the true rendering, 'and to present us faultless . . . be glory.' Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no time to make one's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into

ours, and its mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets, who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in regard to God, when he says, 'Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?' and immediately goes on to say, 'They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' So it is from God, the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great promises is put another one: 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles,' and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say, fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has gone, if, looking unto Him, we 'run with patience the race,' and walk with cheerfulness the road, 'that is set before us.'

## FROM DAWN TO NOON

'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'—PROVERBS iv. 18.

'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father.'—MATT. xiii. 43.

THE metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah's triumphal song, we find, 'Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' In one of the latest parts of the Old Testament, Daniel's prophecy, we read, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' Then in the New Testament we have Christ's comparison of His servants to light, and the great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them all is this—the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights. The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light steadily increases till the noontide. 'The perfect day' is a somewhat unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down 'the arrows that fly by noonday.' The text does not go any further, it does not talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense

alone, it seems to hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.'

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in the heavens, may be analysed into three beams—purity, knowledge, blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my text. There is our Lord's beautiful one of vegetable growth: 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.' There is the other metaphor of the stages of human life, 'babes in Christ,' young men in Him, old men and fathers. There is the metaphor of the growth

of the body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure. We are to 'edify ourselves together,' and to 'build ourselves up on our most holy faith.' There is the other emblem of a race—continual advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region, like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject, the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives us—and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows—an absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids us not only be 'perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely unreachable, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of



despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an anæsthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it, there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all, 'this is the will of God, even your perfection.'

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding. The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the consequences of sin—a kind of 'fire-escape.' And to very many it comes as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned, that these ought to be lives of steadily

increasing deliverance from the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation and manifestation of Christ's granted righteousness. There are, I think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away. I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ was anything to us, than we are to-day. 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.'

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old babes still, and will die so. Suns 'growing brighter and brighter until the noonday!' Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated; the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray, and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the practical side of Christianity,

while the rational side of it, which should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves, 'Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live nearer Jesus Christ to-day than I did yesterday? Have I more of His Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?' Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt themselves out, and are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the *Alpha* and the *Omega* of this, the one means which includes all other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He said, 'Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.' Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth, get less of its light and heat; and those that circle around it within the limits of

our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is, the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths of his Christian character. 'Ye are the light in the Lord.' Keep in Him, and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we 'go from strength to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.'

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished

light for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' The momentary setting is but apparent. And ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the 'ampler ether, the diviner air' of that future life, 'and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.'

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out of which we 'gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.' There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in Apocalyptic vision saw, with His 'countenance as the sun shining in his strength.' Thus 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too. For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all probability to believe that the passage from life can change the ingrained direction and set of a man's nature. We know nothing that warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth. They who on earth are as 'the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,' shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and 'shall blaze out like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' For all that we know and are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal. 'He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.'

### KEEPING AND KEPT

'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.'—PROVERBS iv. 23.

'Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.'—1 PETER i. 5.

THE former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. 'Here is

your duty, do it' is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, 'the issues of life' flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.' The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are

done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this—that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character—and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase ‘with all diligence’ is literally ‘above all guarding,’ and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, ‘Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.’ The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls ‘a fool.’

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full



of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote—princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it—

‘Give not thy humours way ;  
God gave them to thee under lock and key.’

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in

motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of 'the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.'

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying 'No' to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.'

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to 'let thine heart keep my commandments' and to 'trust in the Lord with all thine heart.' The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we 'take heed thereto, according to Thy word.' For even God's viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends

on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God's power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be 'kept by the power of God,' and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new

succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

### III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through

our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, 'The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,' we only add one more impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is 'able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.'

### THE CORDS OF SIN

'His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.'—PROVERBS v. 22.

IN Hosea's tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas! failed of its effect, we read, 'I drew them with cords of a man,' which is further explained as being 'with bands of love.' The metaphor in the prophet's mind is probably that of a child being 'taught to go' and upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life, and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter's toils, enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations,

shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our own sins. We may choose which condition shall be ours, but one or other of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of God's love or we may be 'holden by the cords' of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all. The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain, whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or not. 'His own iniquities shall take the wicked'—they ring him round, a grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have now 'taken' him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since forgotten novel told of the fate of 'a modern Prometheus,' who made and put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us meshed, but let me point out some of these.

## I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is true about both good and bad actions, but 'ill weeds grow apace,' and it is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that custom presses on us 'with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life,' and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard his spots as for those who 'are accustomed to do evil' to 'do good.'

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder held before it, and at last driven into it by 'pricking goads and heavy blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own evil deeds have made for him,

that he commits the sin once more, not because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper has to go on making false entries in his employer's books in order to hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end must be. Let no man say, 'I will do this doubtful thing once only, and never again.' Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can venture to say, 'This once only will I do this thing.' Let us remember that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless deeds.

II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are made. Our



evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why so many of us do not yield to God's merciful drawings of us to Himself? We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us that 'thirsteth for God, even the living God.' Alas! how many of us have let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us that cries out for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after God, who is his 'being's end and aim,' is caught and prisoned by the cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know, when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these are the 'cords' out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of soul, the one real joy of life.

III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the

grave. It is not for a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that 'the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner.' Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the consequences actually encountered. 'A rogue is a roundabout fool.' True, we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense, penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond, surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that every sinful man is miserably 'holden with the cords of his sin.' Life is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping

too, and we do not need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning that 'he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.' Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

IV. The cords can be loosened.

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?'

But to men writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing, and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like their captivity, comes one whose name is 'the Breaker,' whose mission it is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for

many great gifts, but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin, the 'law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus' can make any of us, even him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, 'free from the law of sin and death.' We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three Hebrews in the furnace, when the king 'was astonished' and asked, 'Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' and wonderingly declared, 'Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'

### WISDOM'S GIFT

'That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance.'—PROVERBS viii. 21.

THE word here rendered 'substance' is peculiar. Indeed, it is used in a unique construction in this passage. It means 'being' or 'existence,' and seems to have been laid hold of by the Hebrew thinkers, from whom the books commonly called 'the Wisdom Books' come, as one of their almost technical expressions. 'Substance' may be used in our translation in its philo-

sophical meaning as the supposed reality underlying appearances, but if we observe that in the parallel following clause we find 'treasures,' it seems more likely that in the text, it is to be taken in its secondary, and much debased meaning of wealth, material possessions. But the prize held out here to the lovers of heavenly wisdom is much more than worldly good. In deepest truth, the being which is theirs is God Himself. They who love and seek the wisdom of this book possess Him, and in possessing Him become possessed of their own true being. They are owners and lords of themselves, and have in their hearts a fountain of life, because they have God dwelling with and in them.

I. The quest which always finds.

'Those who love wisdom' might be a Hebrew translation of 'philosopher,' and possibly the Jewish teachers of wisdom were influenced by Greece, but their conception of wisdom has a deeper source than the Greek had, and what they meant by loving it was a widely different attitude of mind and heart from that of the Greek philosopher. It could never be said of the disciples of a Plato that their quest was sure to end in finding what they sought. Many a man then, and many a man since, and many a man to-day, has 'followed knowledge, like a sinking star,' and has only caught a glimmer of a far-off and dubious light. There is only one search which is certain always to find what it seeks, and that is the search which knows where the object of it is, and seeks not as for something the locality of which is unknown, but as for that which the place of which is certain. The manifold voices of human aims cry, 'Who will show us any good?' The seeker who is sure to find is he who prays, 'Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.' The

heart that truly and supremely affects God is never condemned to seek in vain. The Wisdom of this book herself is presented as proclaiming, 'They that seek me earnestly shall find me,' and humble souls in every age since then have set to their seal that the word is true to their experience. For there are two seekers in every such case, God and man. 'The Father seeketh such to worship Him,' and His love goes through the world, yearning and searching for hearts that will turn to Him. The shepherd seeks for the lost sheep, and lays it on his shoulders to bear it back to the fold. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the seeking love of God. And the human seeker finds God, or rather is found by God, for no aspiration after Him is vain, no longing unresponded to, no effort to find Him unresponded to. We have as much of God as we wish, as much as our desires have fitted us to receive. The all-penetrating atmosphere enters every chink open to it, and no seeking soul has ever had to say, 'I sought Him but found Him not.'

Is there any other quest of which the same can be said? Are not all paths of human effort strewn with the skeletons of men who have fretted and toiled away their lives in vain attempts to grasp aims that have eluded their grip? Do we not all know the sickness of disappointed effort, or the sadder sickness of successful effort, which has secured the apparent good and found it not so good after all? The Christian life is, amid all the failures of human effort, the only life in which the seeking after good is but a little less blessed than the finding of it is, and in which it is always true that 'he that seeketh findeth.' Nor does such finding deaden the spirit of seeking, for in every finding there is a fresh discovery of new depths in God, and a consequent

quickenings of desire to press further into the abyss of His Being, so that aspiration and fruition ever beget each other, and the upward, Godward progress of the soul is eternal.

## II. The finding that is always blessed.

We have seen that being is the gift promised to the lovers of wisdom, and that the promise may either be referred to the possession of God, who is the fountain of all being, or to the true possession of ourselves, which is a consequence of our possession of Him. In either aspect, that possession is blessedness. If we have God, we have real life. We truly own ourselves when we have God. We really live when God lives in us, the life of our lives. We are ourselves, when we have ceased to be ourselves, and have taken God to be the Self of ourselves.

Such a life, God - possessing, brings the one good which corresponds to our whole nature. All other good is fragmentary, and being fragmentary is inadequate, as men's restless search after various forms of good but too sadly proves. Why does the merchant-man wander over sea and land seeking for many goodly pearls? Because he has not found one of great price, but tries to make up by their number for the insufficiency of each. But the soul is made, not to find its wealth in the manifold but in the one, and no aggregation of incompletenesses will make up completeness, nor any number of partial satisfactions of this and the other appetite or desire make a man feel that he has enough and more than enough. We must have all good in one Person, if we are ever to know the rest of full satisfaction. It will be fatal to our blessedness if we have to resort to a hundred different sources for different supplies. The true blessedness is simple and

yet infinitely complex, for it comes from possessing the one Person in whom dwell for us all forms of good, whether good be understood as intellectual or moral or emotional. That which cannot be everything to the soul that seeks is scarcely worth the seeking, and certainly is not wisely proposed as the object of a life's search, for such a life will be a failure if it fails to find its object, and scarcely less tragically, though perhaps less conspicuously, a failure if it finds it. All other good is but apparent; God is the one real object that meets all man's desires and needs, and makes him blessed with real blessedness, and fills the cup of life with the draught that slakes thirst and satisfies the thirstiest.

### III. The blessedness that always lasts.

He who finds God, as every one of us may find Him, in Christ, has found a Good that cannot change, pass, or grow stale. His blessedness will always last, as long as he keeps fast hold of that which he has, and lets no man take his crown.

For the Christian's good is the only one that does not intend to grow old and pall. We can never exhaust God. We need never grow weary of Him. Possession robs other wealth of its glamour, and other pleasures of their poignant sweetness. We grow weary of most good things, and those which we have long had, we generally find get somewhat faded and stale. Habit is a fatal enemy to enjoyment. But it only adds to the joy which springs from the possession of God in Christ. Swedenborg said that the oldest angels look the youngest, and they who have longest experience of the joy of fellowship with God are they who enjoy each instance of it most. We can never drink the chalice of His love to the dregs, and it will be fresh and sparkling as long



as we have lips that can absorb it. He keeps the good wine till the last.

The Christian's good is the only good which cannot be taken away. Loss and change beggars the millionaire sometimes, and the possibility of loss shadows all earthly good with pale foreboding. Everything that is outside the substance of the soul can be withdrawn, but the possession of God in Christ is so intimate and inward, so interwoven with the very deepest roots of the Christian's personal being, that it cannot be taken out from these by any shocks of time or change. There is but one hand that can end that possession and that is his own. He can withdraw himself from God, by giving himself over to sin and the world. He can empty the shrine and compel the indwelling deity to say, as the legend told was heard in the Temple the night before Roman soldiers desecrated the Holy of Holies: Let us depart. But besides himself, 'neither things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature' has power to take away that faithful God to whom a poor soul clings, and in whom whoso thus clings finds its unchangeable good.

The Christian's good is the only one from which we cannot be taken. A grim psalm paints for us the life and end of men 'who trust in the multitude of their possessions,' and whose 'inward thought is that they have founded families that will last.' It tells how 'this their way is folly,' and yet is approved with acclamations by the crowd. It lets us see the founder of a family, the possessor of broad acres, going down to the grave, carrying nothing away, stripped of his glory and with Death for his shepherd, who has driven his flock from pleasant pastures here into the dreariness of Sheol. But that shepherd has a double office. Some

he separates from all their possessions, hopes, and joys. Some he, stern though his aspect and harsh though his guidance, leads up to the green pastures of God, and as the last messenger of the love of God in Christ, unites the souls that found God amid the distractions of earth with the God whom they will know better and possess more fully and blessedly, amid the unending felicities and progressive blessednesses of Heaven.

### WISDOM AND CHRIST

'Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; 31. Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.'—PROVERBS viii. 30, 31.

THERE is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with chapter x., contains a collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion, continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious

Folly, and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure delights. She is not a person, but she is a personification of an aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great truth of God's self-communication as being the end and climax of all His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete resemblances between the 'Wisdom' of Proverbs and the 'Sophia' of Greek thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and whilst 'rejoicing always before Him,' yet rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

#### I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.

The words translated in Authorised Version, 'As one brought up with him,' are rendered in Revised Version, 'as a master workman,' and seem intended to represent Wisdom—that is, of course, the divine Wisdom—as having been God's agent in the creative act. In the preceding context, she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His 'works of old,' and that she was with God, 'or ever the earth was.' Before the everlasting mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was the divine

agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one: 'He spake and it was done.' Genesis regards the divine command as the cause of creatural being. God said, 'Let there be—and there was': the forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as 'very good.' To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being a continual delight and a child-like rejoicing in Him, or as the word literally means, a 'sporting' in Him. Whatever energy of creative action is suggested by the preceding figure of a 'master workman,' that energy had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she 'rejoiced always' before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work, the poet's or the painter's rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds, 'and my delight was with the sons of men.' It is noteworthy that the same word is used in the preceding verse. The 'delight of the heavenly Wisdom

in God ' is not unlike that directed to man. 'The sons of men' are the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex, her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence, but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain. Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord? Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

## II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel, utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him they are axiomatic and self evident. 'All things were made by Him.' The words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he proclaims that 'All

things have been created through Him and unto Him, and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.' The writer of Hebrews declares a Son 'through whom also He made the worlds, and who upholds all things by the word of His power,' and does not scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who hymned 'Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.' We speak of things too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the personal Word of John's prologue. John almost quotes the former when he says 'the same was in the beginning with God,' for his word recalls the grand declaration, 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way . . . I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was.' Then there are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of 'the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world,' and calmly declared: 'Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.' Into that depth of mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall

rob the earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the garment of mortality, but laid aside 'the visible robes of His imperial majesty,' and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so turned to 'the sons of men' that He took on Him their nature and Himself bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great thoughts of the divine condescension, and was sure that God's love still rested on men, sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man's sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient personification, and

the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love. Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love, and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartment to, and abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.

### III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs. She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him. We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become Man with 'sweet human hands and lips and eyes.' Such was His delight in the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, 'Come eat ye of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.' He invites us: 'If any man



thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,' and He furnishes a table for us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us, and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. She promises 'riches and honour, yea, durable riches and righteousness.' His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them possess. 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for if they escaped not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips of old, 'much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that beseecheth us from heaven.' Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: 'Whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.'

## THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING

'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity.'—PROVERBS x. 29.

You observe that the words 'shall be,' in the last clause, are a supplement. They are quite unnecessary, and in fact they rather hinder the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the two

halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the 'way of the Lord' is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far deeper and fuller meaning. 'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity.' It is the same way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at some applications and illustrations of the principle.

I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing of these words. 'The way of the Lord' means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of 'the way' as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity; and 'the way of the Lord' is often used in the Psalms for the path which He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and history. 'His goings forth are from

everlasting.' 'His way is in the sea.' 'His way is in the sanctuary.' Modern language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by 'the way of the Lord,' only that God is left out. They talk about the 'current of events,' 'the general tendency of things,' 'the laws of human affairs,' and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned 'Hebraism.' To many modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears. Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history, 'the way of the Lord!'

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not speak of 'ways,' but of 'the way,' as a grand unity. It is all one continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure—that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it 'makes for righteousness.' 'Clouds

and darkness are round about Him,' but the Old Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the hearts of the clouds and darkness, 'Justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne.' The way of the Lord, says this old thinker, is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of God's, and may be sure of the divine favour and of the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' The same eye that beams in lambent love on 'the righteous' burns terribly to the evil doer. 'The face of the Lord' means the side of the divine nature which is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in meaning to 'the way of the Lord,' and the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

*They* do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it

is convex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. 'The way of the Lord' must touch *your* 'way.' You cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You *can* choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word 'strength.' It is used by our translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure: and if we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This 'way of the Lord' is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the 'name of the Lord is a strong tower,' and the 'way of the Lord' is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission. Torture and prison-houses

they might become; frowning portents they necessarily were. 'The way of the Lord' is a castle fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is 'ruin to the workers of iniquity.' I pray you, settle for yourself which of these it is to be to you.

II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or illustration, of these principles that are here.

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise. Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, 'honesty is the best policy,' and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What modern phraseology calls 'laws of nature,' the Bible calls 'the way of the Lord'; and the manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train, and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are

surrounded with powers, which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin brings punishment. 'Riotous living' makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall 'of the flesh reap corruption.' God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of temperance and morality in the body to the 'natural' operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord—the same set of principles and facts—being strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester—some of whom are listening to me now, no doubt—are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity and self-control. They think that they must 'have their fling,' and 'obey their instincts,' and so on. Well, if they must, then another 'must' will insist upon coming into play—and they must reap as they have sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the grave.' Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness, and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the tenderness of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars

in their courses fight against the man that fights against Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and following the dictates of His commandments, 'Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee.' All things serve the soul that serves God, and all war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole 'stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness.' In the one course of life we go with the stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the other we are like men trying to row a boat *up* Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word 'good' means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called 'evil.' All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every 'rogue is a roundabout fool.' So ask yourselves the question: 'Is my life in harmony with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life?'

Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According to the old mystical illustra-



tion, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps—I do not go any further than a perhaps—perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to ‘call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them’ and cover them up in a more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God’s.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while yet the soul has

become dependent on them for ease and comfort. What more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace, and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.

'The way of the Lord' may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All His 'attributes' are builded into 'a strong tower, into which the righteous runneth, and is safe,' or else they are builded into a prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. 'I remembered God, and was troubled,' says one Psalmist. What an awful

confession—that the thought of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be ‘their dearest faith’ is not only their ‘ghastliest doubt,’ but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all ‘workers of iniquity,’ and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this

Gospel. His 'way' therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ's work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it was 'a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.' Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is *something* to each of us. For you who have heard His name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against which whosoever

stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whomsoever it falls upon. 'This Child is set for the rise' or for the fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be—your strength or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. 'What maketh Heaven, that maketh hell.' Which do you choose Him to be?

### THE MANY-SIDED CONTRAST OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

'Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish. 2. A good man obtaineth favour of the Lord: but a man of wicked devices will he condemn. 3. A man shall not be established by wickedness; but the root of the righteous shall not be moved. 4. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones. 5. The thoughts of the righteous are right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit. 6. The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood: but the mouth of the upright shall deliver them. 7. The wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house of the righteous shall stand. 8. A man shall be commended according to his wisdom: but he that is of a perverse heart shall be despised. 9. He that is despised, and hath a servant, is better than he that honoureth himself, and lacketh bread. 10. A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. 11. He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth vain persons is void of understanding. 12. The wicked desireth the net of evil men: but the root of the righteous yieldeth fruit. 13. The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall come out of trouble. 14. A man shall be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth; and the recompence of a man's hands shall be rendered unto him. 15. The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.'—  
PROVERBS xii. 1-15.

THE verses of the present passage are a specimen of the main body of the Book of Proverbs. They are not a building, but a heap. The stones seldom have any mortar between them, and connection or progress is for the most part sought in vain. But one great anti-

thesis runs through the whole—the contrast of wisdom or righteousness with folly or wickedness. The compiler or author is never weary of setting out that opposition in all possible lights. It is, in his view, the one difference worth noting between men, and it determines their whole character and fortunes. The book traverses with keen observation all the realm of life, and everywhere finds confirmation of its great principle that goodness is wisdom and sin folly.

There is something extremely impressive in this continual reiteration of that contrast. As we read, we feel as if, after all, there were nothing in the world but it and its results. That profound sense of the existence and far-reaching scope of the division of men into two classes is not the least of the benefits which a thoughtful study of Proverbs brings to us. In this lesson it is useless to attempt to classify the verses. Slight traces of grouping appear here and there; but, on the whole, we have a set of miscellaneous aphorisms turning on the great contrast, and setting in various lights the characters and fates of the righteous and the wicked.

The first mark of difference is the opposite feeling about discipline. If a man is wise, he will love ‘knowledge’; and if he loves knowledge, he will love the means to it, and therefore will not kick against correction. That is another view of trials from the one which inculcates devout submission to a Father. It regards only the benefits to ourselves. If we want to be taught anything, we shall not flinch from the rod. There must be pains undergone in order to win knowledge of any sort, and the man who rebels against these shows that he had rather be comfortable and ignorant than wise. A pupil who will not stand

having his exercises corrected will not learn his faults. On the other hand, hating reproof is 'brutish' in the most literal sense; for it is the characteristic of animals that they do not understand the purpose of pain, and never advance because they do not. Men can grow because they can submit to discipline; beasts cannot improve because, except partially and in a few cases, they cannot accept correction.

The first proverb deals with wisdom or goodness in its inner source; namely, a docile disposition. The two next deal with its consequences. It secures God's favour, while its opposite is condemned; and then, as a consequence of this, the good man is established and the wicked swept away. The manifestations of God's favour and its opposite are not to be thrown forward to a future life. Continuously the sunshine of divine love falls on the one man, and already the other is condemned. It needs some strength of faith to look through the shows of prosperity often attending plain wickedness, and believe that it is always a blunder to do wrong.

But a moderate experience of life will supply many instances of prosperous villainy in trade and politics which melted away like mist. The shore is strewn with wrecks, dashed to pieces because righteousness did not steer. Every exchange gives examples in plenty. How many seemingly solid structures built on wrong every man has seen in his lifetime crumble like the cloud masses which the wind piles in the sky and then dissipates! The root of the righteous is in God, and therefore he is firm. The contrast is like that of Psalm i.—between the tree with strong roots and waving greenery, and the chaff, rootless, and therefore whirled out of the threshing-floor.

The universal contrast is next applied to women; and in accordance with the subordinate position they held in old days, the bearing of her goodness is principally regarded as affecting her husband. That does not cover the whole ground, of course. But wherever there is a true marriage, the wife will not think that woman's rights are infringed because one chief issue of her beauty of virtue is the honour and joy it reflects upon him who has her heart. 'A virtuous woman' is not only one who possesses the one virtue to which the phrase has been so miserably confined, but who is 'a woman of strength'—no doll or plaything, but

'A perfect woman, nobly planned  
To warn, to comfort, and command.'

The gnawing misery of being fastened like two dogs in a leash to one who 'causes shame' is vividly portrayed by that strong figure, that she is like 'rotteness in his bones,' eating away strength, and inflicting disfigurement and torture.

Then come a pair of verses describing the inward and outward work of the two kinds of men as these affect others. The former verses dealt with their effects on the actors; the present, with their bearing on others. Inwardly, the good man has thoughts which scrupulously keep the balance true and are just to his fellows, while the wicked plans to deceive for his own profit. When thoughts are translated into speech, deceit bears fruit in words which are like ambushes of murderers, laying traps to destroy, while the righteous man's words are like angels of deliverance to the unsuspecting who are ready to fall into the snare. Selfishness, which is the root of wickedness, will be cruelty and injustice when necessary for its ends. The man who is



wise because God is his centre and aim will be merciful and helpful. The basis of philanthropy is religion. The solemn importance attached to speech is observable. Words can slay as truly as swords. Now that the press has multiplied the power of speech, and the world is buzzing with the clatter of tongues, we all need to lay to heart the responsibilities and magic power of spoken and printed words, and 'to set a watch on the door of our lips.'

Then follow a couple of verses dealing with the consequences to men themselves of their contrasted characters. The first of these (verse 7) recurs to the thought of verse 3, but with a difference. Not only the righteous himself, but his house, shall be established. The solidarity of the family and the entail of goodness are strongly insisted on in the Old Testament, though limitations are fully recognised. If a good man's son continues his father's character, he will prolong his father's blessings; and in normal conditions, a parent's wisdom passes on to his children. Something is wrong when, as is so often the case, it does not; and it is not always the children's fault.

The overthrow of the wicked is set in striking contrast with their plots to overthrow others. Their mischief comes back, like an Australian boomerang, to the hand that flings it; and contrariwise, delivering others is a sure way of establishing one's self. Exceptions there are, for the world-scheme is too complicated to be condensed into a formula; but all proverbs speak of the average usual results of virtue and vice, and those of this book do the same. Verse 8 asserts that, on the whole, honour attends goodness, and contempt wickedness. Of course, companions in dissipation extol each other's vices, and launch the old

threadbare sneers at goodness. But if wisdom were not set uppermost in men's secret judgment, there would be no hypocrites, and their existence proves the truth of the proverb.

Verse 9 seems suggested by 'despised' in verse 8. There are two kinds of contempt—one which brands sin deservedly, one which vulgarly despises everybody who is not rich. A man need not mind, though his modest household is treated with contempt, if quiet righteousness reigns in it. It is better to be contented with little, and humble in a lowly place, than to be proud and hungry, as many were in the writer's time and since. A foolish world set on wealth may despise, but its contempt breaks no bones. Self-conceit is poor diet.

This seems to be the first of a little cluster of proverbs bearing on domestic life. It prefers modest mediocrity of station, such as Agur desired. Its successor shows how the contrasted qualities come out in the two men's relation to their domestic animals. Goodness sweeps a wide circle touching the throne of God and the stall of the cattle. It was not Coleridge who found out that 'He prayeth best who loveth best,' but this old proverb-maker; and he could speak the thought without the poet's exaggeration, which robs his expression of it of half its value. The original says 'knoweth the soul,' which may indeed mean, 'regardeth the life,' but rather seems to suggest sympathetic interest in leading to an understanding of the dumb creature, which must precede all wise care for its well-being. It is a part of religion to try to enter into the mysterious feelings of our humble dependants in farmyard and stable. On the other hand, for want of such sympathetic interest, even when the

'wicked' means to be kind, he does harm; or the word rendered 'tender mercies' may here mean the feelings (literally, 'bowels') which, in their intense selfishness, are cruel even to animals.

Verse 11 has no connection with the preceding, unless the link is common reference to home life and business. It contrasts the sure results of honest industry with the folly of speculation. The Revised Version margin 'vain things' is better than the text 'vain persons,' which would give no antithesis to the patient tilling of the first clause. That verse would make an admirable motto to be stretched across the Stock Exchange, and like places on both sides of the Atlantic. How many ruined homes and heart-broken wives witness in America and England to its truth! The vulgar English proverb, 'What comes over the Devil's back goes under his belly,' says the same thing. The only way to get honest wealth is to work for it. Gambling in all its forms is rank folly.

So the next proverb (verse 12) continues the same thought, and puts it in a somewhat difficult phrase. It goes a little deeper than the former, showing that the covetousness which follows after vain things, is really wicked lusting for unrighteous gain. 'The net of evil-doers' is better taken as in the margin (Rev. Ver.) 'prey' or 'spoil,' and the meaning seems to be as just stated. Such hankering for riches, no matter how obtained, or such envying of the booty which admittedly has been won by roguery, is a mark of the wicked. How many professing church members have known that feeling in thinking of the millions of some railway king! Would they like the proverb to be applied to them?

The contrast to this is 'the root of the righteous

yields fruit,' or 'shoots forth,' We have heard (verse 3) that it shall never be moved, being fixed in God; now we are told that it will produce all that is needful. A life rooted in God will unfold into all necessary good, which will be better than the spoil of the wicked. There are two ways of getting on—to struggle and fight and trample down rivals; one, to keep near God and wait for him. 'Ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not.'

The next two proverbs have in common a reference to the effect of speech upon the speaker. 'In the transgression of the lips is an evil snare'; that is, sinful words ensnare their utterer, and whoever else he harms, he himself is harmed most. The reflex influence on character of our utterances is not present to us, as it should be. They leave stains on lips and heart. Thoughts expressed are more definite and permanent thereby. A vicious thought clothed in speech has new power over the speaker. If we would escape from that danger, we must *be* righteous, and *speak* righteousness; and then the same cause will deepen our convictions of 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.'

Verse 14 insists on this opposite side of the truth. Good words will bring forth fruit, which will satisfy the speaker, because, whatever effects his words may have on others, they will leave strengthened goodness and love of it in himself. 'If the house be worthy, your peace shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again.' That reaction of words on oneself is but one case of the universal law of consequences coming back on us. We are the architects of our own destinies. Every deed has an immortal life, and returns, either like a raven or a dove, to the man who sent it out on its flight. It comes back either croaking with blood on its

beak, or cooing with an olive branch in its mouth. All life is at once sowing and reaping. A harvest comes in which retribution will be even more entire and accurate.

The last proverb of the passage gives a familiar antithesis, and partially returns to the thought of verse 1. The fool has no standard of conduct but his own notions, and is absurdly complacent as to all his doings. The wise seeks better guidance than his own, and is docile, because he is not so ridiculously sure of his infallibility. No type of weak wickedness is more abominable to the proverbialist than that of pert self-conceit, which knows so little that it thinks it knows everything, and is 'as untameable as a fly.' But in the wisest sense, it is true that a mark of folly is self-opinionativeness; that a man who has himself for teacher has a fool for scholar; that the test of wisdom is willingness to be taught; and, especially, that to bring a docile, humble spirit to the Source of all wisdom, and to ask counsel of God, is the beginning of true insight, and that the self-sufficiency which is the essence of sin, is never more fatal than when it is ignorant of guilt, and therefore spurns a Saviour.

### THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR

'There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.'—PROVERBS xiii. 7.

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One, that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another, that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps, more common in the days when this

collection of Proverbs was put together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives. We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soap-suds, and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer's mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus Christ. There, too, 'there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet'—or one might, perhaps, say *therefore*—'hath great riches.' It is from that point of view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with recalling to your mind,

#### I. Our universal poverty.

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which

ought to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which the various systems of thinking have given. These lie apart from my present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator. People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that, however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only continued because of the continued operation on every living thing, just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on every existing thing, of the Divine Power. 'In Him we live,' and the life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself 'in whom all things consist,' according to the profound word of the Apostle. Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed long, long

ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like, are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word 'gift' implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of the matter when, speaking of the artistic and æsthetic skill of the workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, 'the Spirit of the Lord' taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength of Samson—surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed—it says that when 'the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,' into his giant hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion's jaws asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have simply because He has given them. 'What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself?' So there is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and traces it all to God, when it says, 'They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house,' for from God comes all that sustains us; 'Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,' for from God comes all that gladdens us; 'with Thee is the fountain of life,' for from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live; 'in Thy light shall we see light,' for every power of perceiving, and all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then, might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only holds,



as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the riches that we have received. 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.'

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own—

'If any power we have, it is to will.'

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves so far away from God, 'in whom we live and move and have our being,' that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways. Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The electricity comes from the central power-station, but it depends on us what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances—what they call nowadays 'environment,' by which formidable word some people seem to think that they have explained away a great many difficulties—make all allowances you like for inheritance—what they now call 'heredity,' by which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin—allow as much as you like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible

consciousness in every man, 'I did it, and it was my fault that I did it; and the moral guilt remains.'

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and—'they had nothing to pay.' We are like bankrupts that begin business with a borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is—

## II. The poor rich man.

'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.' That describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his true condition. There is nothing more tragic—and so it would be seen to be if it were not so common—than that a man, laden, as we each of us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. 'The deceitfulness of sin' is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that obstinate self-com-

placency which approves of a thing because it is mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and appraisal of your own moral and religious character. You durst not, for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent. Then you have far too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, 'I never knew that my voice sounded like that.' And I am quite sure that many of you, if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as in a mirror, you would say, 'I had no notion that I looked like that.' 'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.'

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions of life. If a student

says to himself, 'Oh! I know all that subject,' the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further chance is that he will be 'ploughed' when the examination-day comes. If the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, 'Well done, that is the realisation of my ideal!' he will paint no more anything worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says 'Lo! I have attained,' then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition. The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection. And the man that says 'I am rich' is condemning himself to poverty and pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to show for man's judgment and for God's, and have not been convinced of your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular religion—and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular preach-

ing—there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty, that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us—

### III. The rich poor man.

‘There is that maketh himself poor and yet’—or, as varied, the expression is, ‘therefore hath great riches.’ Jesus Christ has lifted the thoughts in my text into the very region into which I am trying to bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are called, ‘He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Poor, and therefore an owner of a kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started, the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true, that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord’s parable, ‘I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes . . . I pray . . . I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that wretched

publican over there.' Yes, this is the fit attitude for us, — 'He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.'

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course, it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is nothing more than that, he is tortured with 'the sorrow that worketh death.' Judas 'went out and hanged himself'; Peter 'went out and wept bitterly.' The one was sent 'to his own place,' wherever that was; the other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!—the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not break through nor steal.' Blessed be God! the more we have the riches of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing, and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in

yourself, and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth which He freely gives to all who sue *in formâ pauperis*? He does not ask you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness, forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you 'rich toward God.' I beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the strain of this text: 'Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.' And then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are 'rich through faith, and heirs of the Kingdom.'

## THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

**Much food is in the tillage of the poor.**—PROVERBS xiii. 23.

PALESTINE was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. The consequence, as intended, was a level of modest prosperity. It was 'the tillage of the poor,' the careful, diligent husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after, that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land. Hence the proverb of our text arose. It preserves the picture of the economical conditions in which it originated, and it is capable of, and is intended to have, an application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labours of the few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the

many. Small service is true service, and the aggregate of such produces large crops. Spade husbandry gets most out of the ground. The labourer's allotment of half an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire's estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited opportunities if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the psalms accuses 'the children of Ephraim' because, 'being armed and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle.' That saying deduces obligation from equipment, and preaches a stringent code of duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted. Power to its last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of the battle to half-trained soldiers, badly armed.

But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all aspects of Christian effort. The peaceful toil of the 'husbandman that labours' stands, in one of Paul's letters, side by side with the heroism of the 'man that warreth.' Our text gives us the former image, and so supplements that other.

It completes the lesson of the psalm in another respect, as insisting on the importance, not of the well endowed, but of the slenderly furnished, who are immensely in the majority. This text is a message to ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence.

I. It teaches, first, the responsibility of small gifts.

It is no mere accident that in our Lord's great parable He represents the man with the *one* talent as the hider of his gift. There is a certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do, well.



There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it of body or mind; but when we know that we are but very slightly gifted by Him, there is a temptation to say, 'Oh! it does not matter much whether I contribute my share to this, that, or the other work or no. I am but a poor man. My half-crown will make but a small difference in the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will not matter at all. I am only an insignificant unit; nobody pays any attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I make my influence felt in regard of social, religious, or political questions, and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential men. My littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. My little finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale that it is indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me to wrap up my talent—which, after all, is only a threepenny bit, and not a talent—and put it away and do nothing.'

Yes, but then you forget, dear friend! that responsibility does not diminish with the size of the gifts, but that there is as great responsibility for the use of the smallest as for the use of the largest, and that although it does not matter very much to anybody but yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But then, besides that, my text tells us that it does matter whether the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of ground or not. 'There is much food in the tillage of the poor.' The slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two here and there, dotted along the line of the

world's and the Church's history. The great men and wise men and mighty men and wealthy men may be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are to be counted by millions. And unless we can find some stringent law of responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be under no obligation to do anything either for God or for their fellows, or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal, and I am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the same excuse; what then? Then there would not be any weight on the side of the right at all. The barns in Palestine were not filled by farming on a great scale like that pursued away out on the western prairies, where one man will own, and his servants will plough a furrow for miles long, but they were filled by the small industries of the owners of tiny patches.

The 'tillage of the poor,' meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the peasant owner of a little plot, yielded the bulk of the 'food.' The wholesome old proverb, 'many littles make a mickle,' is as true about the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to the most of us than He has even of the cultivation of the large estates that He bestows on a few. Responsibility is not to be measured by amount of gift, but is equally stringent, entire, and absolute whatsoever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you, too, how the same virtues and

excellences can be practised in the administering of the smallest as in that of the greatest gifts. Men say—I dare say some of you have said—‘Oh! if I were eloquent like So-and-so; rich like somebody else; a man of weight and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the Master! But I am slow of speech, or nobody minds me, or I have but very little that I can give.’ Yes! ‘He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.’ If you do not utilise the capacity possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of weeds from its uncultivated clods. We never palm off a greater deception on ourselves than when we try to hoodwink conscience by pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence, and to persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined to do nothing. The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possesses.

All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is the same with God. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive thereof, determines the whole character of the life of which it is a part. The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick sympathy, self-denying effort may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of a halfpenny as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty eave and catches the sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order, as the great arch that strides across half the sky. If you go to the Giant’s Causeway, or to the other end of it amongst the Scotch Hebrides, you will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same pattern and shape, whether their height be

measured by feet or by tenths of an inch. Big or little, they obey exactly the same law. There is 'much food in the tillage of the poor.'

II. But now, note, again, how there must be a diligent cultivation of the small gifts.

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked; and he saw in that a pattern for all life. It is not always the case, of course, that a little holding means good husbandry, but it is generally so; and you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of by miles. There will usually be little waste time, and few neglected opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence, with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of the little patch that does belong to him.

And so, dear brethren! if you and I have to take our place in the ranks of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an unwearied perseverance, by a keen look-out for all opportunities of service, and above all by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The less we are conscious of large gifts the more we should be bowed in dependence on Him from whom cometh 'every good and perfect gift'; and who gives according to His wisdom; and the more earnestly should we use that slender possession which God may have given us. Industry applied to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted away by sloth. You all know that it is so in regard of daily life, and

common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian Church's work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men? The largely endowed men? 'Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called.' The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are the important ones. So let us cultivate them the more earnestly the more humbly we think of our own capacity. 'Play well thy part; there all the honour lies.' God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out of mica-flakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small particles—slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His love.

III. Lastly, let me remind you of the harvest reaped from these slender gifts when sedulously tilled.

Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that abundant 'food' of which the text speaks.

The faithfully used faculty increases. 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'Oh! if I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill it!' Then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring a wider one some time or other. For, as a rule, and in the general, though with exceptions, opportunities come to the man that can use them; and roughly, but yet substantially, men are set in this world where they can shine to the most advantage to God. Fill your place; and if you, like Paul, have borne witness for

the Master in little Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles, which was better than gold. So if we want larger endowments let us honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue, about which I need not say more than a word, is that the final reward of all faithful service—'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord' is said, not to the brilliant, but to the 'faithful' servant. In that great parable, which is the very text-book of this whole subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were entrusted with unequal sums used these unequal sums with equal diligence, as is manifest by the fact that they realised an equal rate of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them, and he that had five did no more; for he, too, but doubled his capital. So, because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten, had equally cultivated their diversely-measured estates, they were identical in reward; and to each of them the same thing is said: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' It matters little whether we copy some great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a thumb-nail; the main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted according to that we have, and not according to that we have not.

## SIN THE MOCKER

'Fools make a mock at sin: but among the righteous there is favour.'—  
PROVERBS xiv. 9.

THE wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man is the good man, and the good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is not only intellectual feebleness—the bad man is a fool, and the godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student and thinker God pronounces the sentence 'Thou fool!'

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is, criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it completely round, and for 'the foolish make a mock at guilt,' would read, 'guilt mocketh at the foolish.' In the original the verb in our text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is 'guilt.' The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to

save some of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty chambers of many an empty soul.

I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured, other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the reaper's hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn. There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David's son, Amnon, puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows—He 'hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her.' Conscience, which was overpowered and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked, impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that promised him so much and hid so much from him.



Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is driving headlong to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that it is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and all but waterlogged, with its canvas 'lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind.' It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the *quid pro quo* is not given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too, which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The 'Folly' of the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten in secret, that 'her guests are in the depths of Sheol.' The temptations that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but 'juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it to the hope.'

## II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints of how little a thing it was. 'Don't make such a mountain of a molehill. It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like.' But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, 'I have got

you now and you cannot get away.' The prey is seduced into the trap by a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible. We are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, 'Show yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims'; the meaning of it was, 'Become my slave.'

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in a sinner's power to promise himself 'It is only this one time that I will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the evil for ever after.' We have to reckon with the tremendous power of habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the hatches and, if need be, the chains.

### III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped.

The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both parts of sin's mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish, the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but 'God is not mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that'—and not some other growth—'shall he also reap.' We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools who say to themselves, 'I did not think it would matter much.' Each act of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and effect, 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Given the world as it is, and the continuous identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend

oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely, more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past. Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost power with vain threats.

## HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful ; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.'—PROVERBS xiv. 13.

'These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be fulfilled.'—JOHN xv. 11 (R.V.).

A POET, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces 'happiness' to be our being's end and aim. That is not true, except under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded as God's end, but it is ruinous to make it man's aim. It is by no means the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy, however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys ; which difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we must begin with that which is deepest, and consider—

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord's wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings, that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense His joy implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their joys as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of

the lake. What then were the sources of the calm joys of 'the Man of Sorrows'? Surely His was the perfect instance of 'rejoicing in the Lord always'—an unbroken communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God, filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be 'the gladness of our joy.' It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience, that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself 'in the depth and not the tumult of the soul.'

Nor must we forget that 'My joy' co-existed with a profound experience of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was 'acquainted with grief'; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those of Christ's joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the world's is drawn

from without. His came from union with the Father, the world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

## II. The Christian's joy is full, the world's partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon's surface into which no light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a magician's palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always one dark;—what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is 'there not always a surly 'elder brother' who will not come in however the musicians may pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is, and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ's joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we have Christ and His joy within us.

If we have everything else, we need His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition, and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister to us—it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth are but like children's toys long since outgrown and left behind. All are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them, and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide 'fullness of joy and pleasures for ever more.' Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the ancient vow: 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine. . . . Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.' If 'My joy' abides in us in its calm and changeless depth, our joy will be 'full' whatever our circumstances may be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'



## SATISFIED FROM SELF

‘... A good man shall be satisfied from himself.’—PROVERBS xiv. 14.

At first sight this saying strikes one as somewhat unlike the ordinary Scripture tone, and savouring rather of a Stoical self-complacency; but we recall parallel sayings, such as Christ’s words, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water’; and the Apostle’s, ‘Then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone.’ We further note that the text has an antithetic parallel in the preceding clause, where the picture is drawn of ‘a backslider in heart,’ as ‘filled with his own ways’; so that both clauses set forth the familiar but solemn thought that a man’s deeds react upon the doer, and apart from all thoughts of divine judgment, themselves bring certain retribution. To grasp the inwardness of this saying we must note that—

### I. Goodness comes from godliness.

There is no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notion which they have of what is good. The word has been degraded to mean in common speech little more than amiability, and is applied with little discrimination to characters of which little more can be said than that they are facile and indulgent of evil. ‘A good fellow’ may be a very bad man. At the highest the epithet connotes merely more or less admirable motives and more or less admirable deeds as their results, whilst often its use is no more than a piece of unmeaning politeness. That was what the young ruler meant by addressing Christ as ‘Good Master’; and Christ’s answer to him set him, and should set us, on asking ourselves why we call very ordinary men and very ordinary actions ‘good.’ The

scriptural notion is immensely deeper, and the scriptural employment of the word is immensely more restricted. It is more inward: it means that motives should be right before it calls any action good; it means that our central and all-influencing motive should be love to God and regard to His will. That is the Old Testament point of view as well as the New. Or to put it in other words, the 'good man' of the Bible is a man in whom outward righteousness flows from inward devotion and love to God. These two elements make up the character: godliness is an inseparable part of goodness, is the inseparable foundation of goodness, and the sole condition on which it is possible. But from this conception follows, that a man may be truly called good, although not perfect. He may be so and yet have many failures. The direction of his aspirations, not the degree to which these are fulfilled, determines his character, and his right to be reckoned a good man. Why was David called 'a man after God's own heart,' notwithstanding his frightful fall? Was it not because that sin was contrary to the main direction of his life, and because he had struggled to his feet again, and with tears and self-abasement, yet with unconquerable desire and hope, 'pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling'? David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New bid us be of good cheer, and warn us against the too common error of thinking that goodness means perfection. 'The new moon with a ragged edge' is even in its imperfections beautiful, and in its thinnest circlet prophesies the perfect round.

Remembering this inseparable connection between godliness and goodness we further note that—

II. Godliness brings satisfaction.

There is a grim contrast between the two halves of this verse. The former shows us the backslider in heart as filled 'with his own ways.' He gets weary with satiety; with his doings he 'will be sick of them'; and the things which at first delighted will finally disgust and be done without zest. There is nothing sadder than the gloomy faces often seen in the world's festivals. But, on the other hand, the godly man will be satisfied from within. This is no Stoical proclamation of self-sufficingness. Self by itself satisfies no man, but self, become the abiding-place of God, does satisfy. A man alone is like 'the chaff which the wind driveth away'; but, rooted in God, he is 'like a tree planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf does not wither.' He has found all that he needs. God is no longer without him but within; and he who can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' has within him the secret of peace and the source of satisfaction which can never say 'I thirst.' Such an inward self, in which God dwells and through which His sweet presence manifests itself in the renewed nature, sets man free from all dependence for blessedness on externals. We hang on them and are in despair if we lose them, because we have not the life of God within us. He who has such an indwelling, and he only, can truly say, 'All my possessions I carry with me.' Take him and strip from him, film after film, possessions, reputation, friends; hack him limb from limb, and as long as there is body enough left to keep life in him, he can say, 'I have all and abound.' 'Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better possession.'

### III. Godly goodness brings inward satisfaction.

No man is satisfied with himself until he has sub-

jugated himself. What makes men restless and discontented is their tossing, anarchical desires. To live by impulse, or passion, or by anything but love to God, is to make ourselves our own tormentors. It is always true that he 'who loveth his life shall lose it,' and loses it by the very act of loving it. Most men's lives are like the troubled sea, 'which cannot rest,' and whose tossing surges, alas! 'cast up mire and dirt,' for their restless lives bring to the surface much that was meant to lie undisturbed in the depths.

But he who has subdued himself is like some still lake which 'heareth not the loud winds when they call,' and mirrors the silent heavens on its calm surface. But further, goodness brings satisfaction, because, as the Psalmist says, 'in keeping Thy commandments there is great reward.' There is a glow accompanying even partial obedience which diffuses itself with grateful warmth through the whole being of a man. And such goodness tends to the preservation of health of soul as natural, simple living to the health of the body. And that general sense of well-being brings with it a satisfaction compared with which all the feverish bliss of the voluptuary is poor indeed.

But we must not forget that satisfaction from one's self is not satisfaction *with* one's self. There will always be the imperfection which will always prevent self-righteousness. The good man after the Bible pattern most deeply knows his faults, and in that very consciousness is there a deep joy. To be ever aspiring onwards, and to know that our aspiration is no vain dream, this is joy. Still to press 'toward the mark,' still to have 'the yet untroubled world which gleams before us as we move,' and to know that we shall attain if we follow on, this is the highest bliss. Not the

accomplishment of our ideal, but the cherishing of it, is the true delight of life.

Such self-satisfying goodness comes only through Christ. He makes it possible for us to love God and to trust Him. Only when we know 'the love wherewith He has loved us,' shall we love with a love which will be the motive power of our lives. He makes it possible to live outward lives of obedience, which, imperfect as it is, has 'great reward.' He makes it possible for us to attain the yet unattained, and to be sure that we 'shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' He has said, 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.' Only when we can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' will it be true of us in its fullest sense, 'A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'

## WHAT I THINK OF MYSELF AND WHAT GOD THINKS OF ME

All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the Lord weigheth the spirits.—PROVERBS xvi. 2.

'ALL the ways of a man'—then there is no such thing as being conscious of having gone wrong, and having got into miry and foul ways? Of course there is; and equally of course a broad statement such as this of my text is not to be pressed into literal accuracy, but is a simple, general assertion of what we all know to be true, that we have a strange power of blinding ourselves as to what is wrong in ourselves and in our actions. Part of the cure for that lies in the thought in the second clause of the text—'But the Lord weigheth the spirits.' He weighs them in a

balance, or as a man might take up something and poise it on his palm, moving his hand up and down till his muscles by their resistance gave him some inkling of its weight. But what is it that God weighs? 'The spirits.' We too often content ourselves with looking at our ways; God looks at ourselves. He takes the inner man into account, estimates actions by motives, and so very often differs from our judgment of ourselves and of one another.

Now so far the verse of my text carries me, and as a rule we have to keep ourselves within the limits of each verse in reading this Book of Proverbs, for two adjoining verses have very seldom anything to do with each other. But in the present case they have, for here is what follows: 'Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts' (about thyself and everything else) 'shall be established.' That is to say, since we make such terrible blunders about the moral character of our own works, and since side by side with these erroneous estimates there is God's absolutely correct and all-penetrating one, common sense says: 'Put yourself into His hands, and then it will be all right.' So we consider now these very well-worn and familiar thoughts as to our strange blunders about ourselves, as to the contemporaneous divine estimate, which is absolutely correct, and as to the practical issues that come from two facts.

#### I. Our strange power of blinding ourselves.

It is difficult to make so threadbare a commonplace at all impressive. But yet if we would only take this thought, 'All the ways of a man'—that is me—'are right in his own eyes'—that is, my eyes—and apply it directly to our own personal experience and thoughts of ourselves, we should find that, like every other

commonplace of morality and religion, the apparently toothless generality has sharp enough teeth, and that the trite truth flashes up into strange beauty, and has power to purify and guide our lives. Some one says that 'recognised truths lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with exploded errors.' And I am afraid that that is true of this thought, that we cannot truly estimate ourselves.

'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes.' For to begin with, we all know that there is nothing that we so habitually neglect as the bringing of conscience to bear right through all our lives. Sometimes it is because there is a temptation that appeals very strongly, perhaps to sense, perhaps to some strong inclination which has been strengthened by indulgence. And when the craving arises, that is no time to begin asking, 'Is it right, or is it wrong to yield?' That question stands small chance of being wisely considered at a moment when, under the goading of roused desire, a man is like a mad bull when it charges. It drops its head and shuts its eyes, and goes right forward, and no matter whether it smashes its horns against an iron gate, and damages them and itself, or not, on it will go. So when great temptations rise—and we all know such times in our lives—we are in no condition to discuss that question with ourselves. Sometimes the craving is so vehement that if we could not get this thing that we want without putting our hands through the sulphurous smoke of the bottomless pit, we should thrust them out to grasp it. But in regard to the smaller commonplace matters of daily life, too, we all know that there are whole regions of our lives which seem to us to be so small that it is hardly worth while summoning the august thought

of 'right or wrong?' to decide them. Yes, and a thousand smugglers that go across a frontier, each with a little package of contraband goods that does not pay any duty, make a large aggregate at the year's end. It is the trifles of life that shape life, and it is to them that we so frequently fail in applying, honestly and rigidly, the test, 'Is this right or wrong?' 'He that is faithful in that which is least,' and conscientious down to the smallest things, 'is faithful also in much.' The legal maxim has it, 'The law does not care about the very smallest matters.' What that precisely means, as a legal maxim, I do not profess to know, but it is rank heresy in regard to conduct and morality. Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves. Get the habit of bringing conscience to bear on little things, or you will never be able to bring it to bear when great temptations come and the crises emerge in your lives. Thus, by reason of that deficiency in the habitual application of conscience to our lives, we slide through, and take for granted that all our ways are right in our eyes.

Then there is another thing: we not only neglect the rigid application of conscience to all our lives, but we have a double standard, and the notion of right and wrong which we apply to our neighbours is very different from that which we apply to ourselves. No wonder that the criminal is acquitted, and goes away from the tribunal 'without a stain on his character,' when he is his own judge and jury. 'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes,' but the very same 'ways' that you allow to pass muster and condone in yourselves, you visit with sharp and unfailing censure in others. That strange self-complacency which we have, which is perfectly undisturbed by the most



general confessions of sinfulness, and only shies when it is brought up to particular details of faults, we all know is very deep in ourselves.

Then there is another thing to be remembered, and that is—the enormous and the<sup>1</sup> tragical influence of habit in dulling the mirror of our souls, on which our deeds are reflected in their true image. There are places in Europe where the peasantry have become so accustomed to minute and constantly repeated doses of arsenic that it is actually a minister of health to them, and what would poison you is food for them. We all know that we may sit in a hall like this, packed full and steaming, while the condensed breath is running down the windows, and never be aware of the foulness of the odours and the air. But when we go out and feel the sweet, pure breath of the unpolluted atmosphere, then we know how habit has dulled the lungs. And so habit dulls the conscience. According to the old saying, the man that began by carrying a calf can carry an ox at the end, and feel no burden. What we are accustomed to do we scarcely ever recognise to be wrong, and it is these things which pass because they are habitual that do more to wreck lives than occasional outbursts of far worse evils, according to the world's estimate of them. Habit dulls the eye.

Yes; and more than that, the conscience needs educating just as much as any other faculty. A man says, 'My conscience acquits me'; then the question is, 'And what sort of a conscience have you got, if it acquits you?' All that your conscience says is, 'It is right to do what is right, it is wrong to do what is wrong.' But for the explanation of what is wrong and what is right you have to go somewhere else

than to your consciences. You have to go to your reason, and your judgment, and your common sense, and a hundred other sources. And then, when you have found out what is right and what is wrong, you will hear the voice saying, 'Do that, and do not do this.' Every one of us has faults that we know nothing about, and that we bring up to the tribunal of our consciences, and wipe our mouths and say, 'We have done no harm.' 'I thought within myself that I verily ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' 'They think that they do God service.' Many things that seem to us virtues are vices.

And as for the individual so for the community. The perception of what is right and what is wrong needs long educating. When I was a boy the whole Christian Church of America, with one voice, declared that 'slavery was a patriarchal institution appointed by God.' The Christian Church of to-day has not awakened either to the sin of war or of drink. And I have not the smallest doubt that there are hosts of things which public opinion, and Christian public opinion, regards to-day as perfectly allowable and innocent, and, perhaps, even praiseworthy, and over which it will ask God's blessing, at which, in a hundred years our descendants will hold up their hands in wonder, and say, 'How did good people—and good people they no doubt were—tolerate such a condition of things for a moment?' 'All a man's ways are right in his own eyes,' and he needs a great deal of teaching before he comes to understand what, according to God's will, really is right and what is wrong.

Now let me turn for a moment to the contrasted picture, with which I can only deal in a sentence or two.

## II. The divine estimate.

I have already pointed out the two emphatic thoughts that lie in that clause, 'God weigheth,' and 'weigheth the spirits.' I need not repeat what I said, in the introduction to these remarks, upon this subject. Just let us take with us these two thoughts, that the same actions which we sometimes test, in our very defective and loaded balances, have also to go into the infallible scales, and that the actions go with their interpretation in their motive. 'God weighs the spirits.' He reads what we do by His knowledge of what we are. We reveal to one another what we are by what we do, and, as is a commonplace, none of us can penetrate, except very superficially and often inaccurately, to the motives that actuate. But the motive is three-fourths of the action. God does not go from without, as it were, inwards; from our actions to estimate our characters; but He starts with the character and the motive—the habitual character and the occasional motive—and by these He reads the deed. He weighs, ponders, penetrates to the heart of the thing, and He weighs the spirits.

So on the one hand, 'I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief,' and many a deed which the world would condemn, and in which we onlookers would see evil, God does not wholly condemn, because He, being the Inlooker as well as the Onlooker, sees the albeit mistaken yet pure motives that underlay it. So it is conceivable that the inquisitor, and the heretic that he sent to the stake, may stand side by side in God's estimate; the one if he were actuated by pure zeal for the truth, the other because he was actuated by self-sacrifice in loyalty to his Lord. And, on the other hand, many a deed that goes flaunting

through the world in 'purple and fine linen' will be stripped of its gauds, and stand naked and ugly before the eyes of 'Him with whom we have to do.' He 'weighs the spirits.'

Lastly, a word about—

III. The practical issues of these thoughts.

'Commit thy works unto the Lord'—that is to say, do not be too sure that you are right because you do not think you are wrong. We should be very distrustful of our own judgments of ourselves, especially when that judgment permits us to do certain things. 'I know nothing against myself,' said the Apostle, 'yet am I not hereby justified.' And again, still more emphatically, he lays down the principle that I would have liked to have enlarged upon if I had had time. 'Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the things which he alloweth.' You may have made the glove too easy by stretching. It is possible that you may think that something is permissible and right which a wiser and more rigid and Christlike judgment of yourself would have taught you was wrong. Look under the stones for the reptiles, and remember the prayer, 'Cleanse thou me from secret faults,' and distrust a permitting and easy conscience.

Then, again, let us seek the divine strengthening and illumination. We have to seek that in some very plain ways. Seek it by prayer. There is nothing so powerful in stripping off from our besetting sins their disguises and masks as to go to God with the honest petition: 'Search me . . . and try me . . . and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' Brethren! if we will do that, we shall get answers that will startle us, that will humble us, but that will be blessed beyond all other blessedness,

and will bring to light the 'hidden things of darkness.' Then, after they are brought to light and cast out, 'then shall every man have praise of God.'

We ought to keep ourselves in very close union with Jesus Christ, because if we cling to Him in simple faith, He will come into our hearts, and we shall be saved from walking in darkness, and have the light of life shining down upon our deeds. Christ is the conscience of the Christian man's conscience, who, by His voice in the hearts that wait upon Him, says, 'Do this,' and they do it. It is when He is in our spirits that our estimate of ourselves is set right, and that we hear the voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it'; and not merely do we hear the voice, but we get help to our feet in running in the way of His commandments, with enlarged and confirmed hearts. Brethren! for the discovery of our faults, which we ought all to long for, and for the conquest of these discovered faults, which, if we are Christians, we do long for, our confidence is in Him. And if you trust Him, 'the blood of Christ will cleanse'—because it comes into our life's blood—'from all sin.'

And the last thing that I would say is this. We must punctiliously obey every dictate that speaks in our own consciences, especially when it urges us to unwelcome duties or restrains us from too welcome sins. 'To him that hath shall be given'—and the sure way to condemn ourselves to utter blindness as to our true selves is to pay no attention to the glimmers of light that we have, whilst, on the other hand, the sure way to be led into fuller illumination is to follow faithfully whatsoever sparkles of light may shine upon our hearts. 'Do the duty that lies nearest thee.' Put thy trust in Jesus Christ. Distrust thine own approbation

or condonation of thine actions, and ever turn to Him and say, 'Show me what to do, and make me willing and fit to do it.' Then there will be little contrariety between your estimate of your ways and God's judgments of your spirits.

### A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS

'Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly. 23. The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips. 24. Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones. 25. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. 26. He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him. 27. An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire. 28. A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends. 29. A violent man enticeth his neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good. 30. He shutteth his eyes to devise froward things: moving his lips he bringeth evil to pass. 31. The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness. 32. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city. 33. The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.'—PROVERBS xvi. 22-33.

A SLIGHT thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in this passage. Verse 22, with its praise of 'Wisdom,' introduces one instance of Wisdom's excellence in verse 23, and that again, with its reference to speech, leads on to verse 24 and its commendation of 'pleasant words.' Similarly, verses 27-30 give four pictures of vice, three of them beginning with 'a man.' We may note, too, that, starting with verse 26, every verse till verse 30 refers to some work of 'the mouth' or 'lips.'

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring. We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and Folly do not refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of 'Wisdom,' as this book

conceives it, is the 'fear of the Lord,' without which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind, is, in its judgment, 'a fool.' Such 'understanding,' which apprehends and rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to His law, is a 'well-spring of life.' The figure speaks still more eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring, bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows through the deeds. 'Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh.' Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which begins with the fear of God. Just as *it* is active in the life, so is Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive. For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the 'fool' from profiting by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod, its subjects 'receive no correction.' That insensibility is the paradox and the Nemesis of 'Folly.'

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise

heart makes wise speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor, of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only source of real 'learning,'—namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel, but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us. A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our 'Wisdom.' In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way of getting Wisdom than by many books,—namely, by filling our hearts, through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have worldly 'learning' or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like 'honey,' but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of bitterness like the prophet's roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of honey catches more flies than a hogshhead of vinegar.

Verse 25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn truths, according to the possible double meaning of 'right.' If that word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning gross sin. If it means only *straight*, or level—that is, successful and easy—the saying enforces



the not less solemn truth that sin deceives as to its results, and that the path of wrong-doing, which is flowery and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and ends at last in a *cul-de-sac*, of which death is the only outlet. We are not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God's Word. We are not to listen to sin's lies, but to fix it well in our minds that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of verse 26 gives the right idea. 'The appetite,' or hunger, 'of the labourer labours for him' (that is, the need of food is the main-spring of work), and it lightens the work to which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires, and anticipates the beatitude on those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness.' Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

The next three proverbs (vs. 27-29) give three pictures of different types of bad men. First, we have 'the worthless man' (Rev. Ver.), literally 'a man of Belial,' which last word probably means worthlessness. His work is 'digging evil'; his words are like scorching fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit for others (Ps. vii. 15), which is usually

taken as a parallel. The man is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his deeds. No honey drops from *his* lips, but scorching fire, which burns up not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James says, such a tongue is 'set on fire of hell.' The picture is that of a man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close approximations to it, and no man can say, 'Thus far will I go in evil ways, and no further.'

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The 'froward man' here seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In verse 29 another type of evil-doer is outlined—the opposite, in some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or 'violence.' But how does that fit in with 'enticeth'? It may be that the enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is meant, but more probably there

is here the same combination of force and craft as in chapter i. 10-14. Criminals have a wicked delight in tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless desperado is a hotbed of infection.

Verse 30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men, one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just described. The 'if' in verse 31 weakens the strong assertion of the proverb. 'The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness.' That is but putting into picturesque form the Old Testament promise of long life to the righteous—a promise which is not repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised. 'Whom the gods love, die young,' is a heathen proverb; but there is a natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with their 'bones full of the iniquities of their youth,' to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to 'reverence and the silver hair,' we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb extols the ruler of his own spirit as 'more than conquerors,' whose triumphs

are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges. Our sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

‘Unless above himself he can  
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!’

Verse 31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means, while the whole issue must be left in God’s hands. The Jewish law did not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him there were but two real moving forces in the world—man and God. To the one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited. Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God’s. We sow; He ‘gives it a body as it pleases Him.’ Nothing happens by accident. Man’s little province is bounded on all sides by God’s, and the two touch. There is no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.

## TWO FORTRESSES

‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. 11. The rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit.’—PROVERBS xviii. 10, 11.

THE mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual rule in the Book of Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as the margin of your Bibles will tell

you, the last word of the former verse might be more correctly rendered, 'the righteous runneth into it, and is set on high.' It is the same word which is employed in the next verse—'a high wall.'

So we have 'the strong tower' and 'the strong city'; the man lifted up above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying himself to be high above it (and only fancying himself) in the imaginary safety of the other.

I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes of inexhaustible power; and on the other, 'the rich man's wealth.' What contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the author had said, 'Look on this picture and on that!' Two fortresses! Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put your foot through—solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with bitter emphasis—'a high wall *in his own conceit*.'

'The name of the Lord,' of course, is the Biblical expression for the whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of *Jehovah*, there is much of 'the name'

in its wider sense. For that name 'Jehovah,' both by its signification and by the circumstances under which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is self-existent, depending upon no other creature. 'I AM THAT I AM!' No other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, 'I am that which God made me.' Circumstances and a hundred other things have made me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within Himself.

'He sits on no precarious throne,  
Nor borrows leave to be.'

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent, eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal, changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness, with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He is 'a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.'

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the knowledge of God's deepest heart and character which we learn in Him who said, 'I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it.' Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness, gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded 'the strong tower' broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a wider

name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is 'the strong tower' is the name 'My Father!' a Father of infinite tenderness and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on the mother's breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of the father's arms? 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower.'

Now turn to the other for a moment: 'The rich man's wealth is' (with great emphasis on the next little word) '*his* strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.' Of course we have not to deal here only with wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the whole mass of the 'things seen and temporal,' are gathered together here in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall, or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and defended—so do men deal with these outward things that are given them for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus said to His disciples once: 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom'; and when they were astonished at His words, He repeated them with the significant variation, 'How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter.

into the Kingdom of God.' So He would teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier, but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange, and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: 'Oh yes! the promises of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at the banker's.' How many of you would rather honestly, and at the bottom of your hearts, have that than God's word for your defence? How many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen beyond—the things that *are*, and He who alone really is, and in His boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with



which my last text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only, but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the rich man who thinks that everything is right because he *is* rich, are exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is not a sound state of opinion which has made 'what is he *worth*?' mean 'how much of *it* has he?' We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life as being mainly wealth. To win that is 'success'—'prosperity'—and it is very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart—that of all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more disastrously than the notion that the *summum bonum*, the shield and stay of a man, is the 'abundance of the things that he possesses.' I fancy I see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul together, and as much furniture as

will enable a man to sit at his meal and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.

‘The righteous runneth into it and is safe,’ says my text. You may get into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there. There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you can make God your defence. How *does* a man make this world his defence? By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, ‘Thou art my confidence,’ has made it his fortress—and that is how you will make God your fortress—by trusting to *Him*. The very same emotion, the very same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you please. Direct it earthwards, and you ‘trust in the uncertainty of riches.’ Flash it heavenwards, and you ‘trust in the living God.’

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, ‘The righteous runneth into it.’ I do not dwell upon the word ‘righteous.’ That is the Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man who would be perplexed by a theologian’s talk will understand this: ‘The righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.’

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the road, or how overpowering the heat—no time to stop to gather flowers, or even diamonds on the road, when a moment's delay might mean the enemy's sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure. One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses 'trust' means literally 'to flee to a refuge.' The Old Testament *trust* is the New Testament *faith*, even as the Old Testament '*Name of the Lord*' answers to the New Testament '*Name of Jesus*.' And so we run into this sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith—the trust of mind, heart, and will—laying hold of the name of the Lord, makes us 'righteous,' and so capable of 'dwelling with the devouring fire' of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point

of view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as strongly as the Old Testament, 'no man shall see the Lord.' It shows us that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is—Have you 'fled for refuge to lay hold' on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling the towers thereof, 'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower'? If you have, then 'because you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.'

III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that the words 'is safe' were more accurately as well as picturesquely rendered by 'is set aloft.' They remind us of the psalm which has many points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same thought when it says, 'I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.' The fugitive

is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower, and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and separation and loneliness and death; 'and all the ills that flesh is heir to.'

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: 'The tower is so deep that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach it, so high that no ladder can scale it.' 'The righteous runneth into it,' and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall 'show scarce so gross as beetles' from the height where he stands, safe and high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful

and unharmed, and that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death, who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our fortress - dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry to Him,

‘Lo! from sin and grief and shame,  
Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.’

### A STRING OF PEARLS

‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise. 2. The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion: whose provoketh him to anger sinneth against his own soul. 3. It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling. 4. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing. 5. Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out. 6. Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find? 7. The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him.’—PROVERBS xx. 1-7.

THE connection between the verses of this passage is only in their common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to brand the opposite

vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. 'Wine is a mocker.' Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road. Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be revered, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of them.

'A brawler,' or, as Delitzsch renders it, 'boisterous'—look into a liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets, 'drunk and disorderly.' So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been. Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version 'is deceived,' and in Revised Version 'erreth,' is literally 'staggers' or 'reels,' and it is more graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the

unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, 'is not wise.' How much stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself, and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control. He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call *him* wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger, and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who stirs him 'forfeits his own life,' or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered 'sins' has for its original meaning 'misses,' and seems to be so used here, as also in Proverbs viii. 36. 'Against' is a supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction, as any old-world tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation, which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this precept, and to say, 'Let the



brute roar, and never mind if you *do* forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world should be saying "Yes."

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and condemns pugnacity. Men talk of 'glory' as the warrior's meed, and the so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage which regards 'honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what 'honour' or 'glory' was, and where it grew.

'Peace hath her victories

No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than 'no less,' and gives *greater* glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls. Any fool can 'show his teeth,' as the word for 'quarrelling' means. But it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Verse 4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg (or, perhaps, *seek for a crop*) in harvest, and will find nothing, when others are rejoicing in the 'slow result

of winter showers' and of their toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are driving their reaping machines into the fields. 'There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.' The law is inexorable for this life, and not less certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' and were answered, 'Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now!' are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had come. 'To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and winds it up full. 'Still waters are deep.' The faculty of reading men may be abused to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims, and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in detecting evil, in knowing how to present God's truth to hearts that need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their fellows to love God and serve Him—preachers, teachers, and the like. And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in verse 6 is susceptible of different

renderings in the first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, 'Almost every man meets a man who is gracious to him.' The contrast will then be between partial 'grace' or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliability or trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions, on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality, professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which 'believeth all things,' cannot but admit that soft words are more abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of love to open one's eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a loose-tongued profession of kindness as a contrast. Neither the one nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in this proverb is double—do not take much heed of men's eulogiums on their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than mere succession in time conveyed by the expression 'after him.' It may mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in men's benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted to them a revered name. A Christian's children are doubly bound to continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart from it. There is no

sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him wail. Absalom hanging by his ears in the oak-tree, and David groaning, 'My son, my son,' touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so often repeated in our homes to-day!

### THE SLUGGARD IN HARVEST

'The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he have no harvest, and have nothing.'—PROVERBS xx. 4.

LIKE all the sayings of this book, this is simply a piece of plain, practical common sense, intended to inculcate the lesson that men should diligently seize the opportunity whilst it is theirs. The sluggard is one of the pet aversions of the Book of Proverbs, which, unlike most other manuals of Eastern wisdom, has a profound reverence for honest work.

He is a great drone, for he prefers the chimney-corner to the field, even although it cannot have been very cold if the weather was open enough to admit of ploughing. And he is a great fool, too, for he buys his comfort at a very dear price, as do all men who live for to-day, and let to-morrow look out for itself.

But like most of the other sayings of this book, my text contains principles which are true in the highest regions of human life, for the laws which rule up there are not different from those which regulate the motions of its lower phases. Religion recognises the same practical common-sense principles that daily business does. I venture to take this as my text now, in addressing young people, because they have special need of, and special facilities for, the wisdom which it enjoins; and because the words only want to be turned

with their faces heavenwards in order to enforce the great appeal, the only one which it is worth my while to make, and worth your while to come here to listen to; the appeal to each of you, 'I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to God' *now*.

My object, then, will be perhaps best accomplished if I simply ask you to look, first, at the principles involved in this quaint proverb; and, secondly, to apply them in one or two directions.

I. First, then, let us try to bring out the principles which are crystallised in this picturesque saying.

The first thought evidently is: present conduct determines future conditions. Life is a series of epochs, each of which has its destined work, and that being done, all is well; and that being left undone, all is ill.

Now, of course, in regard to many of the accidents of a man's condition, his conduct is only one, and by no means the most powerful, of the factors which settle them. The position which a man fills, the tasks which he has to perform, and the whole host of things which make up the externals of his life, depend upon far other conditions than any that he brings to them. But yet on the whole it is true that what a man does, and is, settles how he fares. And this is the mystical importance and awful solemnity of the most undistinguished moments and most trivial acts of this awful life of ours, that each of them has an influence on all that comes after, and may deflect our whole course into altogether different paths. It is not only the moments that we vulgarly and blindly call great which settle our condition, but it is the accumulation of the tiny ones; the small deeds, the unnoticed acts, which make up so large a portion of every man's life. It is these, after all, that are the most powerful in settling what we

shall be. There come to each of us supreme moments in our lives. Yes! and if in all the subordinate and insignificant moments we have not been getting ready for them, but have been nurturing dispositions and acquiring habits, and cultivating ways of acting and thinking which condemn us to fail beneath the requirements of the supreme moment, then it passes us by, and we gain nothing from it. Tiny mica flakes have built up the Matterhorn, and the minute acts of life after all, by their multiplicity, make up life to be what it is. 'Sand is heavy,' says this wise book of Proverbs. The aggregation of the minutest grains, singly so light that they would not affect the most delicate balance, weighs upon us with a weight 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' The mystic significance of the trivialities of life is that in them we largely make destiny, and that in them we wholly make character.

And now, whilst this is true about all life, it is especially true about youth. You have facilities for moulding your being which some of us older men would give a great deal to have again for a moment, with our present knowledge and bitter experience. The lava that has solidified into hard rock with us is yet molten and plastic with you. You can, I was going to say, be anything you make up your minds to; and, within reasonable limits, the bold saying is true. 'Ask what thou wilt and it shall be given to thee' is what nature and Providence, almost as really as grace and Christ, say to every young man and woman, because you are the arbiters, not wholly, indeed, of your destiny, and are the architects, altogether, of your character, which is more.

And so I desire to lay upon your hearts this threadbare old truth, because you are living in the ploughing

time, and the harvest is months ahead. Whilst it is true that every day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the parent of all the to-morrows, it is also true that life has its predominant colouring, varying at different epochs, and that for you, though you are largely inheriting, even now, the results of your past, brief as it is, still more largely is the future, the plastic future, in your hands, to be shaped into such forms as you will. 'The child is father of the man,' and the youth has the blessed prerogative of standing before the mouldable to-morrow, and possessing a nature still capable of being cast into an almost infinite variety of form.

But then, not only do you stand with special advantages for making yourselves what you will, but you specially need to be reminded of the terrible importance and significance of each moment. For this is the very irony of human life, that we seldom awake to the sense of its importance till it is nearly ended, and that the period when reflection would avail the most is precisely the period when it is the least strong and habitual. What is the use of an old man like me thinking about what he could make of life if he had it to do over again, as compared with the advantage of your doing it? Yet I dare say that for once that you think thus, my contemporaries do it fifty times. So, not to abate one jot of your buoyancy, not to cast any shadow over joys and hopes, but to lift you to a sense of the blessed possibilities of your position, I want to lay this principle of my text upon your consciences, and to beseech you to try to keep it operatively in mind—you are making yourselves, and settling your destiny, by every day of your plastic youth.

There is another principle as clear in my text—viz., the easy road is generally the wrong one. The

sluggard was warmer at the fireside than he would be in the field with his plough in the north wind, and so he stopped there. There are always obstacles in the way of noble life. It is always easier, as flesh judges, to live ignobly than to live as Jesus Christ would have us live. 'Endure hardness' is the commandment to all who would be soldiers of any great cause, and would not fling away their lives in low self-indulgence. If a man is going to be anything worth being, or to do anything worth doing, he must start with, and adhere to this, 'to scorn delights and live laborious days.' And only then has he a chance of rising above the fat dull weed that rots in Lethe's stream, and of living anything like the life that it becomes him to live.

Be sure of this, dear young friends, that self-denial and rigid self-control, in its two forms, of stopping your ears to the attractions of lower pleasures, and of cheerily encountering difficulties, is an indispensable condition of any life which shall at the last yield a harvest worth the gathering, and not destined to be

'Cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete.'

Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the plain path of duty by any difficulties. Never allow yourselves to be guided in your choice of a road by the consideration that the turf is smooth, and the flowers by the side of it sweet. Remember, the sluggard would have been warmer, with a wholesome warmth, at the ploughtail than cowering in the chimney corner. And the things that seem to be difficulties and hardships only need to be fronted to yield, like the east wind in its season, good results in bracing and hardening. Fix it in your minds that nothing worth doing is done but at the cost of difficulty and toil.



That is a lesson that this generation wants, even more than some that have lived. I suppose it is one of the temptations of older men to look askance upon the amusements of younger ones, but I cannot help lifting up here one word of earnest appeal to the young men and women of this congregation, and beseeching them, as they value the nobleness of their own lives, and their power of doing any real good, to beware of what seems to me the altogether extravagant and excessive love, and following after, of mere amusement which characterises this day to so large an extent. Better toil than such devotion to mere relaxation.

The last principle here is that the season let slip is gone for ever. Whether my text, in its second picture, intends us to think of the sluggard when the harvest came as 'begging' from his neighbours; or whether, as is possibly the construction of the Hebrew, it simply means to describe him as going out into his field, and looking at it, and asking for the harvest and seeing nothing there but weeds, the lesson it conveys is the same—the old, old lesson, so threadbare that I should be almost ashamed of taking up your time with it unless I believed that you did not lay it to heart as you should. Opportunity is bald behind, and must be grasped by the forelock. Life is full of tragic *might-have-beens*. No regret, no remorse, no self-accusation, no clear recognition that I was a fool will avail one jot. The time for ploughing is past; you cannot stick the share into the ground when you should be wielding the sickle. 'Too late' is the saddest of human words. And, my brother, as the stages of our lives roll on, unless each is filled as it passes with the discharge of the duties, and the appropriation of the benefits which it brings, then, to all eternity, that moment will never

return, and the sluggard may beg in harvest that he may have the chance to plough once more, and have none. The student that has spent the term in indolence, perhaps dissipation, has no time to get up his subject when he is in the examination-room, with the paper before him. And life, and nature, and God's law, which is the Christian expression for the heathen one of *nature*, are stern taskmasters, and demand that the duty shall be done in its season or left undone for ever.

II. In the second place, let me, just in a few words, carry the lamp of these principles of my text and flash its rays upon one or two subjects.

Let me say a word, first, about the lowest sphere to which my text applies. I referred at the beginning of this discourse to this proverb as simply an inculcation of the duty of honest work, and of the necessity of being wide awake to opportunities in our daily work. Now, the most of you young men, and many of you young women, are destined for ordinary trades, professions, walks in commerce; and I do not suppose it to be beneath the dignity of the pulpit to say this: Do not trust to any way of getting on by dodges or speculation, or favour, or anything but downright hard work. Don't shirk difficulties, don't try to put the weight of the work upon some colleague or other, that you may have an easier life of it. Set your backs to your tasks, and remember that 'in all labour there is profit'; and whether the profit comes to you in the shape of advancement, position, promotion in your offices, partnerships perhaps, wealth, and the like, or no, the profit lies in the work. Honest toil is the key to pleasure.

Then, let me apply the text in a somewhat higher direction. Carry these principles with you in the cultivation of that important part of yourself—your

intellects. What would some of us old students give if we had the flexibility, the power of assimilating new truth, the retentive memories, that you young people have? Some of you, perhaps, are students by profession; I should like all of you to make a conscience of making the best of your brains, as God has given them to you, a trust. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold.' The dawdler will read no books that tax his intellect, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing. Amidst all the flood of feeble, foolish, flaccid literature with which we are afflicted at this day, I wonder how many of you young men and women ever set yourselves to some great book or subject that you cannot understand without effort. Unless you do you are not faithful stewards of the supreme gift of God to you of that great faculty which apprehends and lives upon truth. So remember the sluggard by his fireside; and do you get out with your plough.

Again I say, apply these principles to a higher work still—that of the formation of character. Nothing will come to you noble, great, elevating, in that direction, unless it is sought, and sought with toil.

'In woods, in waves, in wars, she wont to dwell,  
And will be found with peril and with pain;  
Before her gate high Heaven did sweat ordain,  
And wakeful watches ever to abide.'

Wisdom and truth, and all their elevating effects upon human character, require absolutely for their acquirement effort and toil. You have the opportunity still. As I said a moment ago—you may mould yourselves into noble forms. But in the making of character we have to work as a painter in fresco does, with a swift brush on the plaster while it is wet. It sets and hardens in an hour. And men drift into habits which

become tyrannies and dominant before they know where they are. Don't let yourselves be shaped by accident, by circumstance. Remember that you can build yourselves up into forms of beauty by the help of the grace of God, and that for such building there must be the diligent labour and the wise clutching at opportunity and understanding of the times which my text suggests.

And, lastly, let these principles applied to religion teach us the wisdom and necessity of beginning the Christian life at the earliest moment. I am by no means prepared to say that the extreme tragedy of my text can ever be wrought out in regard to the religious experience of any man here on earth, for I believe that at any moment in his career, however faultful and stained his past has been, and however long and obstinate has been his continuance in evil, a man may turn himself to Jesus Christ, and beg, and not in vain, nor ever find 'nothing' there.

But whilst all that is quite true, I want you, dear young friends, to lay this to heart, that if you do not yield yourselves to Jesus Christ now, in your early days, and take Him for your Saviour, and rest your souls upon Him, and then take Him for your Captain and Commander, for your Pattern and Example, for your Companion and your Aim, you will lose what you can never make up by any future course. You lose years of blessedness, of peaceful society with Him, of illumination and inspiration. You lose all the sweetness of the days which you spend away from Him. And if at the end you did come to Him, you would have one regret, deep and permanent, that you had not gone to Him before. If you put off, as some of you are putting off, what you know you ought to do—namely, give your

hearts to Jesus Christ and become His—think of what you are laying up for yourselves thereby. You get much that it would be gain to lose—bitter memories, defiled imaginations, stings of conscience, habits that it will be very hard to break, and the sense of having wasted the best part of your lives, and having but the fag end to bring to Him. And if you put off, as some of you are disposed to do, think of the risk you run. It is very unlikely that susceptibilities will remain if they are trifled with. You remember that Felix trembled once, and sent for Paul often; but we never hear that he trembled any more. And it is quite possible, and quite likely, more likely than not, that you will never be as near being a Christian again as you are now, if you turn away from the impressions that are made upon you at this moment, and stifle the half-formed resolution.

But there is a more solemn thought still. This life as a whole is to the future life as the ploughing time is to the harvest, and there are awful words in Scripture which seem to point in the same direction in reference to the irrevocable and irreversible issue of neglected opportunities on earth, as this proverb does in regard to the ploughing and harvests of this life.

I dare not conceal what seems to me the New Testament confirmation and deepening of the solemn words of our text, 'He shall beg in harvest and have nothing,' by the Master's words, 'Many shall say to me in that day, Lord! Lord! and I will say, I never knew you.' The five virgins who rubbed their sleepy eyes and asked for oil when the master was at hand got none, and when they besought, 'Lord! Lord! open to us,' all the answer was, 'Too late! too late! ye cannot enter now.' Now, while it is called day, harden not your hearts.

## BREAD AND GRAVEL

'Bread of deceit is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel.'—PROVERBS XX. 17.

'BREAD of deceit' is a somewhat ambiguous phrase, which may mean either of two things, and perhaps means both. It may either mean any good obtained by deceit, or good which deceives in its possession. In the former signification it would appear to have reference primarily to unjustly gotten gain, while in the latter it has a wider meaning and applies to all the worthless treasures and lying delights of life. The metaphor is full of homely vigour, and the contrast between the sweet bread and the gravel that fills the mouth and breaks the teeth, carries a solemn lesson which is perpetually insisted upon in this book of Proverbs, and confirmed in every man's experience.

I. The first lesson here taught is the perpetuity of the most transient actions.

We are tempted to think that a deed done is done with, and to grasp at momentary pleasure, and ignore its abiding consequences. But of all the delusions by which men are blinded to the true solemnity of life none is more fatal than that which ignores the solemn 'afterwards' that has to be taken into account. For, whatever issues in outward life our actions may have, they have all a very real influence on their doers; each of them tends to modify character, to form habits, to drag after itself a whole trail of consequences. Each strikes inwards and works outwards. The whole of a life may be set forth in the pregnant figure, 'A sower went forth to sow,' and 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' The seed may lie long dormant,

but the green shoots will appear in due time, and pass through all the stages of 'first the blade, and then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear.' The sower has to become the reaper, and the reaper has to eat of the bread made from the product of the long past sowing. Shall *we* have to reap a harvest of poisonous tares, or of wholesome wheat? 'If 'twere done when 'tis done, 'twere well it were done quickly'; but since it begins to do when 'tis done, it were often better that it were not done at all. A momentary pause to ask ourselves when tempted to evil, 'And what then?' would burst not a few of the painted bubbles after which we often chase.

Is there any reason to suppose that these permanent consequences of our transient actions are confined in their operation to this life? Does not such a present, which is mainly the continuous result of the whole past, seem at least to prophesy and guarantee a similar future? Most of us, I suppose, believe in the life continuous through and after death retributive in a greater degree than life here. Whatever changes may be involved in the laying aside of the 'earthly house of this tabernacle,' it seems folly to suppose that in it we lay aside the consequences of our past inwrought into our very selves. Surely wisdom suggests that we try to take into view the whole scope of our actions, and to carry our vision as far as the consequences reach. We should all be wiser and better if we thought more of the 'afterwards,' whether in its partial form in the present, or in its solemn completion in the future beyond.

## II. The bitterness of what is sweet and wrong.

There is no need to deny that 'bread of deceit is sweet to a man.' There is a certain pleasure in a lie,

and the taste of the bread purchased by it is not embittered because it has been bought by deceit. If we succeed in getting the good which any strong desire hungers after, the gratification of the desire ministers pleasure. If a man is hungry, it matters not to his hunger how he has procured the bread which he devours. And so with all forms of good which appeal to sense. The sweetness of the thing desired and obtained is more subtle, but not less real, if it nourishes some inclination or taste of a higher nature. But such sweetness in its very essence is momentary, and even, whilst being masticated, 'bread of deceit' turns into gravel; and a mouthful of it breaks the teeth, excoriates the gums, interferes with breathing, and ministers no nourishment. The metaphor has but too familiar illustrations in the experience of us all. How often have we flattered ourselves with the thought, 'If I could but get this or that, how happy I should be'? How often when we got it have we been as happy as we expected? We had forgotten the voice of conscience, which may be overborne for a moment, but begins to speak more threateningly when its prohibitions have been neglected; we had forgotten that there is no satisfying our hungry desires with 'bread of deceit,' but that they grow much faster than it can be presented to them; we had forgotten the evil that was strengthened in us when it has been fed; we had forgotten that the remembrance of past delights often becomes a present sorrow and shame; we had forgotten avenging consequences of many sorts which follow surely in the train of sweet satisfactions which are wrong.

So, even in this life nothing keeps its sweetness which is wrong, and nothing which is sweet and wrong avoids



a *tang* of intensest bitterness 'afterwards.' And all that bitterness will be increased in another world, if there is another, when God gives us to read the book of our lives which we ourselves have written. Many a page that records past sweetness will then be felt to be written, 'within and without,' with lamentation and woe.

All bitterness of what is sweet and wrong makes it certain that sin is the stupidest, as well as the wickedest, thing that a man can do.

### III. The abiding sweetness of true bread.

In a subordinate sense, the true bread may be taken as meaning our own deeds inspired by love of God and approved by conscience. They may often be painful to do, but the pain merges into calm pleasure, and conscience whispers a foretaste of heaven's 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' The roll may be bitter to the lips, but, eaten, becomes sweet as honey; whereas the world's bread is sweet at first but bitter at last. The highest wisdom and the most exacting conscience absolutely coincide in that which they prescribe, and Scripture has the warrant of universal experience in proclaiming that sin in its subtler and more refined forms, as well as in its grosser, is a gigantic mistake, and the true wisdom and reasonable regard for one's own interest alike point in the same direction,—to a life based on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as being the life which yields the happiest results to-day and perpetual bliss hereafter. But let us not forget that in the highest sense Christ Himself is the 'true bread that cometh down from heaven.' He may be bitter at first, being eaten with tears of penitence and painful efforts at conquering sin, but even in the first bitterness there is sweetness beyond all the earth

can give. He 'spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies,' and the bread which He gives tastes as the manna of old did, like wafers made of honey. Only perverted appetites loathe this light bread and prefer the strong-favoured leeks and garlies of Egypt. They who sit at the table in the wilderness will finally sit at the table prepared in the kingdom of the heavens.

### A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

'My son, if thine heart be wise, my heart shall rejoice, even mine. 16. Yea, my reins shall rejoice, when thy lips speak right things. 17. Let not thine heart envy sinners; but be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off. 19. Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and guide thine heart in the way. 20. Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: 21. For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty; and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags. 22. Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old. 23. Buy the truth and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 15-23.

THE precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual 'fear of the Lord,' temperance, eager efforts to win and retain 'the truth,' have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy (verses 15, 16). The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, 'What would my mother say?' and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God's heart is glad when man's is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness—a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will

send forth sweet waters. 'If thy heart become wise' is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. *We are foolish; we become wise.*

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of 'right' speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man's speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. 'By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.' 'God's great gift of speech abused' is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness (verses 17, 18). The supplement 'be thou,' in the second clause of verse 17, obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: 'Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord.' The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the

subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.' The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God 'or ever the earth was,' and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of 'durable riches and righteousness.'

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such whole-hearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from 'sinners.' In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. 'All the current of my being' must 'set to thee' if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but 'all the day long.' It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small

cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continual 'dwelling in the house of the Lord'; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in verse 18 says so. The 'reward' (Rev. Ver.) of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on 'thy,' contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure 'cutting off' of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psalm xxxvii. 38, has the same word here rendered 'reward,' and declares that 'the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off.' The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in verses 19-21. First, note that general

one of verse 19, 'Guide thine heart in the way.' In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a 'way' in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to 'draw aside, are implied in the very conception of 'the way.' And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of 'guiding the heart.' Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deuteronomy **xxi.** 20, in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it—namely, refusal to 'hear' parental reproof—is warned against in verse 22. The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers

of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

IV. The last part is in verses 22 and 23. The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, 'If I be a father, where is mine honour?' There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way—and it is a very real danger.

But the main point here is the earnest exhortation of verse 23, which, like that to the fear of the Lord, sums up all duty in one. The 'truth' is, like 'wisdom,' moral and religious, and not merely intellectual. 'Wisdom' is subjective, the quality or characteristic of the devout soul; 'truth' is objective, and may also be defined as the declared will of God. The possession of truth is wisdom. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' It makes wise the simple. There is, then, such a thing as 'the truth' accessible to us. We can know it, and are not to be for ever groping amid more or less likely guesses, but may rest in the certitude that we have hold



of foundation facts. For us, the truth is incarnate in Jesus, as He has solemnly asserted. That truth we shall, if we are wise, 'buy,' by shunning no effort, sacrifice, or trouble needed to secure it.

In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is 'without money and without price,' and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. 'Sell it not,'—let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its 'fruit is better than gold,' and its 'revenue than choice silver.' We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for 'wisdom is better than rubies,' and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up 'the truth' and got instead 'the whole world.'

## THE AFTERWARDS AND OUR HOPE

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end and thine expectation shall not be cut off.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 17, 18.

THE Book of Proverbs seldom looks beyond the limits of the temporal, but now and then the mists lift and a wider horizon is disclosed. Our text is one of these exceptional instances, and is remarkable, not only as expressing confidence in the future, but as expressing

it in a very striking way. 'Surely there is an end,' says our Authorised Version, substituting in the margin, for end, 'reward.' The latter word is placed in the text of the Revised Version. But neither 'end' nor 'reward' conveys the precise idea. The word so translated literally means 'something that comes after.' So it is the very opposite of 'end,' it is really that which lies beyond the end—the 'sequel,' or the 'future'—as the margin of the Revised Version gives alternatively, or, more simply still, the afterwards. Surely there is an afterwards behind the end. And then the proverb goes on to specify one aspect of that afterwards: 'Thine expectation'—or, better, because more simply, thy hope—shall not be cut off. And then, upon these two convictions that there is, if I might so say, an afterclap, and that it is the time and the sphere in which the fairest hopes that a man can paint to himself shall be surpassed by the reality, it builds the plain partial exhortation: 'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.'

So then, we have three things here, the certainty of the afterwards, the immortality of hope consequent thereon, and the bearing of these facts on the present.

#### I. The certainty of the hereafter.

Now, this Book of Proverbs, as I have said in the great collection of popular sayings which makes the bulk of it, has no enthusiasm, no poetry, no mysticism. It has religion, and it has a very pure and lofty morality, but, for the most part, it deals with maxims of worldly prudence, and sometimes with cynical ones, and represents, on the whole, the wisdom of the market-place, and the 'man in the street.' But now and then, as I have said, we hear strains of a higher mood. My text, of course, might be watered down and narrowed so as

to point only to sequels to deeds realised in this life. And then it would be teaching us simply the very much needed lessons that even in this life, 'Whatever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' But it seems to me that we are entitled to see here, as in one or two other places in the Book of Proverbs, a dim anticipation of a future life beyond the grave. I need not trouble you with quoting parallel passages which are sown thinly up and down the book, but I venture to take the words in the wider sense to which I have referred.

Now, the question comes to be, where did the coiners of Proverbs, whose main interest was in the obvious maxims of a prudential morality, get this conviction? They did not get it from any lofty experience of communion with God, like that which in the seventy-third Psalm marks the very high-water mark of Old Testament faith in regard to a future life, where the Psalmist finds himself so completely blessed and well in present fellowship with God, that he must needs postulate its eternal continuance, and just because he has made God the portion of his heart, and is holding fellowship with Him, is sure that nothing can intervene to break that sweet communion. They did not get it from any clear definite revelation, such as we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made that future life far more than an inference for us, but they got it from thinking over the facts of this present life as they appeared to them, looked at from the standpoint of a belief in God, and in righteousness. And so they represent to us the impression that is made upon a man's mind, if he has the 'eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality,' that is made by the facts of this earthly life—viz. that it is so full of onward-looking, prophetic aspect, so manifestly and tragically, and yet

wonderfully and hopefully, incomplete and fragmentary in itself, that there must be something beyond in order to explain, in order to vindicate, the life that now is. And that aspect of fragmentary incompleteness is what I would insist upon for a moment now.

You sometimes see a row of houses, the end one of them has, in its outer gable wall, bricks protruding here and there, and holes for chimney-pieces that are yet to be put in. And just as surely as that external wall says that the row is half built, and there are some more tenements to be added to it, so surely does the life that we now live here, in all its aspects almost, bear upon itself the stamp that it, too, is but initial and preparatory. You sometimes see, in the bookseller's catalogue, a book put down 'volume one; all that is published.' That is our present life—volume one, all that is published. Surely there is going to be a sequel, volume two. Volume two is due, and will come, and it will be the continuation of volume one.

What is the meaning of the fact that of all the creatures on the face of the earth only you and I, and our brethren and sisters, do not find in our environment enough for our powers? What is the meaning of the fact that, whilst 'foxes have holes' where they curl themselves up, and they are at rest, 'and the birds of the air have roosting-places,' where they tuck their heads beneath their wings and sleep, the 'son of man' hath not where to lay his head, but looks round upon the earth and says, 'The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy. I am a stranger on the earth.' What is the meaning of it? Here is the meaning of it: 'Surely there is a hereafter.'

What is the meaning of the fact that lodged in men's natures there lies that strange power of painting to

themselves things that are not as though they were? So that minds and hearts go out wandering through Eternity, and having longings and possibilities which nothing beneath the stars can satisfy, or can develop? The meaning of it is this: Surely there is a hereafter. The man that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, in his sceptical moment ere he had attained to his last conclusion, says, in a verse that is mistranslated in our rendering, 'He hath set Eternity in their hearts, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' That is true, because the root of all our unrest and dissatisfaction is that we need God, and God in Eternity, in order that we may be at rest. But whilst on the one hand 'therefore the misery of man is great upon him,' on the other hand, because Eternity is in our hearts, therefore there is the answer to the longings, the adequate sphere for the capacities in that great future, and in the God that fills it. You go into the quarries left by reason of some great convulsion or disaster, by forgotten races, and you will find there half excavated and rounded pillars still adhering to the matrix of the rock from which they were being hewn. Such unfinished abortions are all human lives if, when Death drops its curtain, there is an end.

But, brethren, God does not so clumsily disproportion His creatures and their place. God does not so cruelly put into men longings that have no satisfaction, and desires which never can be filled, as that there should not be, beyond the gulf, the fair land of the hereafter. Every human life obviously has in it, up to the very end, the capacity for progress. Every human life, up to the very end, has been educated and trained, and that, surely, for something. There may be masters in workshops who take apprentices, and teach them their

trade during the years that are needed, and then turn round and say, 'I have no work for you, so you must go and look for it somewhere else.' That is not how God does. When He has trained His apprentices He gives them work to do. Surely there is a hereafter.

But that is only part of what is involved in this thought. It is not only a state subsequent to the present, but it is a state consequent on the present, and the outcome of it. The analogy of our earthly life avails here. To-day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the yesterdays and to-day are the parent of to-morrow. The past, our past, has made us what we are in the present, and what we are in the present is making us what we shall be in the future. And when we pass out of this life we pass out, notwithstanding all changes, the same men as we were. There may be much on the surface changed, there will be much taken away, thank God! dropped, necessarily, by the cessation of the corporeal frame, and the connection into which it brings us with things of sense. There will be much added, God only knows how much, but the core of the man will remain untouched. 'We all are changed by still degrees,' and suddenly at last 'All but the basis of the evil.' And so we carry ourselves with us into that future life, and, 'what a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their afterward!

II. Now, secondly, my text suggests the immortality of hope. 'Thine expectation'—or rather, as I said, 'thy hope'—'shall not be cut off.' This is a characteristic of that hereafter. What a wonderful saying that is which also occurs in this Book of Proverbs, 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' Ah! we all know how swiftly, as years increase, the things to hope for

diminish, and how, as we approach the end, less and less do our imaginations go out into the possibilities of the sorrowing future. And when the end comes, if there is no afterwards, the dying man's hopes must necessarily die before he does. If when we pass into the darkness we are going into a cave with no outlet at the other end, then there is no hope, and you may write over it Dante's grim word: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' But let in that thought, 'surely there is an afterwards,' and the enclosed cave becomes a rock-passage, in which one can see the arch of light at the far end of the tunnel; and as one passes through the gloom, the eye can travel on to the pale radiance beyond, and anticipate the ampler ether, the diviner air, 'the brighter constellations burning, mellow moons and happy stars,' that await us there. 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' 'Thine expectation shall not be cut off.'

But, further, that conviction of the afterward opens up for us a condition in which imagination is surpassed by the wondrous reality. Here, I suppose, nobody ever had all the satisfaction out of a fulfilled hope that he expected. The fish is always a great deal larger and heavier when we see it in the water than when it is lifted out and scaled. And I suppose that, on the whole, perhaps as much pain as pleasure comes from the hopes which are illusions far more often than they are realities. They serve their purpose in whirling us along the path of life and in stimulating effort, but they do not do much more.

But there does come a time, if you believe that there is an afterwards, when all we desired and painted to ourselves of possible good for our craving spirits shall be felt to be but a pale reflex of the reality, like the

light of some unrisen sun on the snowfields, and we shall have to say 'the half was not told to us.'

And, further, if that afterwards is of the sort that we, through Jesus Christ and His resurrection and glory, know to be, then all through the timeless eternity hope will be our guide. For after each fresh influx of blessedness and knowledge we shall have to say 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be.' 'Thus now abideth'—and not only now, but then and eternally—'these three—faith, hope, and charity,' and hope will never be cut off through all the stretch of that great afterwards.

III. And now, finally, notice the bearing of all this on the daily present.

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' The conviction of the hereafter, and the blessed vision of hopes fulfilled, are not the only reasons for that exhortation. A great deal of harm has been done, I am afraid, by well-meaning preachers who have drawn the bulk of their strongest arguments to persuade men to Christian faith from the thought of a future life. Why, if there were no future, it would be just as wise, just as blessed, just as incumbent upon us to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' But seeing that there is that future, and seeing that only in it will hope rise to fruition, and yet subsist as longing, surely there comes to us a solemn appeal to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' which being turned into Christian language, is to live by habitual faith, in communion with, and love and obedience to, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Surely, surely the very climax and bad eminence of folly is shutting the eyes to that future that we all have to face; and to live here, as some of you are



doing, ignoring it and God, and cribbing, cabining, and confining all our thoughts within the narrow limits of the things present and visible. For to live so, as our text enjoins, is the sure way, and the only way, to make these great hopes realities for ourselves.

Brethren, that afterwards has two sides to it. The prophet Malachi, in almost his last words, has a magnificent apocalypse of what he calls 'the day of the Lord,' which he sets forth as having a double aspect. On the one hand, it is lurid as a furnace, and burns up the wicked root and branch. I saw a forest fire this last autumn, and the great pine-trees stood there for a moment pyramids of flame, and then came down with a crash. So that hereafter will be to godless men. And on the other side, that 'day of the Lord' in the prophet's vision was radiant with the freshness and dew and beauty of morning, and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. Which of the two is it going to be to us? We have all to face it. We cannot alter that fact, but we can settle how we shall face it. It will be to either the fulfilment of blessed hope, the 'appearance of the glory of the great God and our Saviour,' or else, as is said in this same Book of Proverbs: 'The hope of the godless' shall be like one of those water plants, the papyrus or the flag, which, when the water is taken away, 'withereth up before any other herb.' It is for us to determine whether the afterwards that we must enter upon shall be the land in which our hopes shall blossom and fruit, and blossom again immortally, or whether we shall leave behind us, with all the rest that we would fain keep, the possibility of anticipating any good. 'Surely there is an afterwards,' and if thou wilt 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' then for evermore 'thy hope shall not be cut off.'

## THE PORTRAIT OF A DRUNKARD

'Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? 30. They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. 31. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. 32. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. 33. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. 34. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. 35. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 29-35.

THIS vivid picture of the effects of drunkenness leaves its sinfulness and its wider consequences out of sight, and fixes attention on the sorry spectacle which a man makes of himself in body and mind when he 'puts an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains.' Disgust and ridicule are both expressed. The writer would warn his 'son' by impressing the ugliness and ludicrousness of drunkenness. The argument is legitimate, though not the highest.

The vehement questions poured out on each other's heels in verse 29 are hot with both loathing and grim laughter. The two words rendered 'woe' and 'sorrow' are unmeaning exclamations, very like each other in sound, and imitating the senseless noises of the drunkard. They express discomfort as a dog might express it. They are howls rather than words. That is one of the prerogatives won by drunkenness,—to come down to the beasts' level, and to lose the power of articulate speech. The quarrelsomeness which goes along with certain stages of intoxication, and the unmeaning maudlin misery and whimpering into which it generally passes, are next coupled together.

Then come a pair of effects on the body. The tipsy man cannot take care of himself, and reeling against

obstacles, or falling over them, wounds himself, and does not know where the scratches and blood came from. 'Redness of eyes' is, perhaps, rather 'darkness,' meaning thereby dim sight, or possibly 'black eyes,' as we say,—a frequent accompaniment of drunkenness, and corresponding to the wounds in the previous clause. It is a hideous picture, and one that should be burned in on the imagination of every young man and woman. The liquor-sodden, miserable wrecks that are found in thousands in our great cities, of whom this is a picture, were, most of them, in Sunday-schools in their day. The next generation of such poor creatures are, many of them, in Sunday-schools now, and may be reading this passage to-day.

The answer to these questions has a touch of irony in it. The people who win as their possessions these six precious things have to sit up late to earn them. What a noble cause in which to sacrifice sleep, and turn night into day! And they pride themselves on being connoisseurs in the several vintages; they 'know a good glass of wine when they see it.' What a noble field for investigation! What a worthy use of the faculties of comparison and judgment! And how desirable the prizes won by such trained taste and delicate discrimination!

In verses 31 and 32 weighty warning and dehortation follow, based in part on the preceding picture. The writer thinks that the only way of sure escape from the danger is to turn away even the eyes from the temptation. He is not contented with saying 'taste not,' but he goes the whole length of 'look not'; and that because the very sparkle and colour may attract. 'When it is red' might perhaps better be rendered 'when it reddens itself,' suggesting the play of colour,

as if put forth by the wine itself. The word rendered in the Authorised Version and Revised Version 'colour' is literally 'eye,' and probably means the beaded bubbles winking on the surface. 'Moveth itself aright' (Authorised Version) is not so near the meaning as 'goeth down smoothly' (Revised Version). The whole paints the attractiveness to sense of the wine-cup in colour, effervescence, and taste.

And then comes in, with startling abruptness, the end of all this fascination,—a serpent's bite and a basilisk's sting. The kind of poisonous snake meant in the last clause of verse 32 is doubtful, but certainly is one much more formidable than an adder. The serpent's lithe gracefulness and painted skin hide a fatal poison; and so the attractive wine-cup is sure to ruin those who look on it. The evil consequences are pursued in more detail in what follows.

But here we must note two points. The advice given is to keep entirely away from the temptation. 'Look not' is safe policy in regard of many of the snares for young lives that abound in our modern society. It is not at all needful to 'see life,' or to know the secrets of wickedness, in order to be wise and good. 'Simple concerning evil' is a happier state than to have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Many a young man has been ruined, body and soul, by a prurient curiosity to know what sort of life dissipated men and women led, or what sort of books they were against which he was warned, or what kind of a place a theatre was, and so on. Eyes are greedy, and there is a very quick telephone from them to the desires. 'The lust of the eye' soon fans the 'lust of the flesh' into a glow. There are plenty of depths of Satan gaping for young feet; and on the whole, it is safer and happier

not to know them, and so not to have defiling memories, nor run the risk of falling into fatal sins. Whether the writer of this stern picture of a drunkard was a total abstainer or not, the spirit of his counsel not to 'look on the wine' is in full accord with that practice. It is very clear that if a man is a total abstainer, he can never be a drunkard. As much cannot be said of the moderate man.

Note too, how in all regions of life, the ultimate results of any conduct are the important ones. Consequences are hard to calculate, and they do not afford a good guidance for action. But there are many lines of conduct of which the consequences are not hard to calculate, but absolutely certain. It is childish to take a course because of a moment's gratification at the beginning, to be followed by protracted discomfort afterwards. To live for present satisfaction of desires, and to shut one's eyes tight against known and assured results of an opposite sort, cannot be the part of a sensible man, to say nothing of a religious one. So moralists have been preaching ever since there was such a thing as temptation in the world; and men have assented to the common sense of the teaching, and then have gone straight away and done the exact opposite.

'What shall the end be?' ought to be the question at every beginning. If we would cultivate the habit of holding present satisfactions in suspense, and of giving no weight to present advantages until we saw right along the road to the end of the journey, there would be fewer failures, and fewer weary, disenchanted old men and women, to lament that the harvest they had to reap and feed on was so bitter. There are other and higher reasons against any kind of fleshly

indulgence than that at the last it bites like a serpent, and with a worse poison than serpent's sting ever darted; but that is a reason, and young hearts, which are by their very youth blessedly unused to look forward, will be all the happier to-day, and all the surer of to-morrow's good, if they will learn to say, 'And afterwards—what?'

The passage passes to a renewed description of the effects of intoxication, in which the disgusting and the ludicrous aspects of it are both made prominent. Verse 33 seems to describe the excited imagination of the drunkard, whose senses are no longer under his control, but play him tricks that make him a laughing-stock to sober people. One might almost take the verse to be a description of delirium tremens. 'Strange things' are seen, and perverse things (that is, unreal, or ridiculous) are stammered out. The writer has a keen sense of the humiliation to a man of being thus the fool of his own bewildered senses, and as keen a one of the absurd spectacle he presents; and he warns his 'son' against coming down to such a depth of degradation.

It may be questioned whether the boasted quickening and brightening effects of alcohol are not always, in a less degree, that same beguiling of sense and exciting of imagination which, in their extreme form, make a man such a pitiable and ridiculous sight. It is better to be dull and see things as they are, than to be brilliant and see things larger, brighter, or any way other than they are, because we see them through a mist. Imagination set agoing by such stimulus, will not work to as much purpose as if aroused by truth. God's world, seen by sober eyes, is better than rosy dreams of it. If we need to draw our inspiration from

alcohol, we had better remain uninspired. If we desire to know the naked truth of things, the less we have to do with strong drink the better. Clear eyesight and self-command are in some degree impaired by it always. The earlier stages are supposed to be exhilaration, increased brilliancy of fancy and imagination, expanded good-fellowship, and so on. The latter stages are these in our passage, when strange things dance before cheated eyes, and strange words speak themselves out of lips which their owner no longer controls. Is that a condition to be sought after? If not, do not get on to the road that leads to it.

Verse 34 adds another disgusting and ridiculous trait. A man who should try to lie down and go to sleep in the heart of the sea or on the masthead of a ship would be a manifest fool, and would not keep life in him for long. One has seen drunken men laying themselves down to sleep in places as exposed and as ridiculous as these; and one knows the look of the heavy lump of insensibility lying helpless on public roads, or on railway tracks, or anywhere where the fancy took him. The point of the verse seems to be the drunken man's utter loss of sense of fitness, and complete incapacity to take care of himself. He cannot estimate dangers. The very instinct of self-preservation has forsaken him. There he lies, though as sure to be drowned as if he were in the depth of the sea, though on as uncomfortable a bed as if he were rocking on a masthead, where he could not balance himself.

The torpor of verse 34 follows on the unnatural excitement of verse 33, as, in fact, the bursts of uncontrolled energy in which the man sees and says strange things, are succeeded by a collapse. One moment raging in excitement caused by imaginary sights, the

next huddled together in sleep like death,—what a sight the man is! The teacher here would have his ‘son’ consider that he may come to that, if he looks on the wine-cup. ‘*Thou shalt be*’ so and so. It is very impolite, but very necessary, to press home the individual application of pictures like this, and to bid bright young men and women look at the wretched creatures they may see hanging about liquor shops, and remember that they may come to be such as these.

Verse 35 finishes the picture. The tipsy man’s soliloquy puts the copestone on his degradation. He has been beaten, and never felt it. Apparently he is beginning to stir in his sleep, though not fully awake; and the first thing he discovers when he begins to feel himself over is that he has been beaten and wounded, and remembers nothing about it. A degrading anæsthetic is drink. Better to bear all ills than to drown them by drowning consciousness. There is no blow which a man cannot bear better if he holds fast by God’s hand and keeps himself fully exposed to the stroke, than if he sought a cowardly alleviation of it, after the drunkard’s fashion.

But the pains of his beating and the discomforts of his waking do not deter the drunkard. ‘When shall I awake?’ He is not fully awake yet, so as to be able to get up and go for another drink. He is in the stage of feeling sorry for himself, and examining his bruises, but he wishes he were able to shake off the remaining drowsiness, that he might ‘seek yet again’ for his curse. The tyranny of desire, which wakes into full activity before the rest of the man does, and the enfeebled will, which, in spite of all bruises and discomforts, yields at once to the overmastering desire, make the tragedy of a drunkard’s life. There comes a



point in lives of fleshly indulgence in which the craving seems to escape from the control of the will altogether. Doctors tell us that the necessity for drink becomes a physical disease. Yes; but it is a disease manufactured by the patient, and he is responsible for getting himself into such a state.

This tragic picture proves that there were many originals of it in the days when it was painted. Probably there are far more, in proportion to population, in our times. The warning it peals out was never more needed than now. Would that all preachers, parents, and children laid it to heart and took the advice not even to 'look upon the wine'!

## THE CRIME OF NEGLIGENCE

*'If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; 12. If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he render to every man according to his works?'—PROVERBS xxiv. 11, 12.*

WHAT is called the missionary spirit is nothing else than the Christian church working in a particular direction. If a man has a conviction, the health of his own soul, his reverence for the truth he has learnt to love, his necessary connection with other men, make it a duty, a necessity, and a joy to tell what he has heard, and to speak what he believes. On these common grounds rests the whole obligation of Christ's followers to speak the Gospel which they have received; only the obligation presses on them with greater force because of the higher worth of the word and the deeper misery of men without it. The text contains nothing specially bearing on Christian missions, but it deals with the fault which besets us all in our relations and in life;

and the wholesome truths which it utters apply to our duties in regard to Christian missions because they apply to our duties in regard to every misery within our reach. They speak of the murderous cruelty and black sin of negligence to save any whom we can help from any sort of misery which threatens them. They appear to me to suggest four thoughts which I would now deal with:—

I. The crime of negligence.

Not to use any power is a sin; to omit to do anything that we can do is a crime: to withhold a help that we can render is to participate in the authorship of all the misery that we have failed to relieve. He who neglects to save a life, kills. There are more murderers than those who lift violent hands with malice aforethought against a hated life. Rulers or communities who leave people uncared for to die, who suffer swarming millions to live where the air is poison and the light is murky, and first the soul and then the body, are dwarfed and die; the incompetent men in high places, and the indolent ones in low, whose selfishness brings, and whose blundering blindness allows to continue, the conditions that are fatal to life—on these the guilt of blood lies. Violence slays its thousands, but supine negligence slays its tens of thousands.

And when we pass from these merely physical conditions to think of the world and of the Church in the world, where shall we find words weighty and burning enough to tell what fatal cruelty lies in the unthinking negligence so characteristic of large portions of Christ's professed followers? There is nothing which the ordinary type of Christian, so called, more needs than to be aroused to a living sense of personal responsibility for all the unalleviated misery of the world. For

every one who has laid the sorrows of humanity on his heart, and has felt them in any measure as his own, there are a hundred to whom these make no appeal and give no pang. Within ear-shot of our churches and chapels there are squalid aggregations of stunted and festering manhood, of whom it is only too true that they are 'drawn unto death' and 'ready to be slain,' and yet it would be an exaggeration to say that the bulk of our congregations cast even a languid eye of compassion upon those, to say nothing of stretching out a hand to help. It needs to be dinned, far more than it is at present, into every professing Christian that each of us has an obligation which cannot be ignored or shuffled off, to acquaint ourselves with the glaring facts that force themselves upon all thoughtful men, and that the measure of our power is the measure of our obligation. The question, Has the church done its best to deliver these? needs to be sharpened to the point of 'Have I done *my* best?' And the vision of multitudes perishing in the slums of a great city needs to be expanded into the vision of dim millions perishing in the wide world.

## II. The excuse of negligence.

The shuffling plea, 'Behold we knew it not,' is a cowardly lie. It admits the responsibility to knowledge and pretends an ignorance which it knows to be partly a false excuse, and in so far as it is true, to be our own fault. We are bound to know, and the most ignorant of us does know, and cannot help knowing, enough to condemn our negligence. How many of us have ever tried to find out how the pariahs of civilisation live who live beside us? Our ignorance so far as it is real is the result of a sinful indolence. And there is a sadder form of it in an ignorance which is the

result of familiarity. We all know how custom dulls our impressions. It is well that it should be so, for a surgeon would be fit for little if he trembled and was shaken at the sight of the tumour he had to work to remove, as we should be; but his familiarity with misery does not harden him, because he seeks to remove the suffering with which he has become familiar. But that same familiarity does harden and injure the whole nature of the onlooker who does nothing to alleviate it. Then there is an ignorance of other suffering which is the result of selfish absorption in one's own concerns. The man who is caring for himself only, and whose thoughts and feelings all flow in 'he direction of his own success, may see spread before him the most poignant sorrows without feeling one throb of brotherly compassion and without even being aware of what his eyes see. So, in so far as the excuse 'we knew it not' is true, it is no excuse, but an indictment. It lays bare the true reason of the criminal negligence as being a yet more criminal callousness as to the woe and loss in which such crowds of men whom we ought to recognise as brethren are sunken.

### III. The condemnation of negligence.

The great example of God is put forward in the text as the contrast to all this selfish negligence. Note the twofold description of Him given here, 'He that pondereth the heart,' and 'He that keepeth thy soul.' The former of these presents to us God's sedulous watching of the hearts of men, in contrast to our indolent and superficial looks; and in this divine attitude we find the awful condemnation of our disregard of our fellows. God 'takes pain,' so to speak, to see after His children. Are they not bound to look lovingly on each other? God seeks to know them.

Are they not bound to know one another? Lofty disregard of human suffering is not *God's* way. Is it ours? He 'looks down from the height of His sanctuary to hear the crying of the prisoner.' Should not we stoop from our mole-hill to see it? God has not too many concerns on His hands to mark the obscurest sorrow and be ready to help it. And shall we plead that we are too busy with petty personal concerns to take interest in helping the sorrows and fighting against the sins of the world?

No less eloquently does the other name which is here applied to God rebuke our negligence. 'He preserveth thy soul.' By His divine care and communication of life, we live; and surely the soul thus preserved is thereby bound to be a minister of preservation to all that are 'ready to be slain.' The strongest motive for seeking to save others is that God has saved us. Thus this name for God touches closely upon the great Christian thought, 'Christ has given Himself for me.' And in that thought we find the true condemnation of a Christianity which has not caught from Him the enthusiasm for self-surrender, and the passion for saving the outcast and forlorn. If to be a Christian is to imitate Christ, then the name has little application to those who see 'them that are drawn to death,' and turn from them unconcerned and unconscious of responsibility.

#### IV. The judgment of negligence.

'Doth not He render to every man according to his works?' There is such a judgment both in the present and in the future for Christian men as for others. And not only what they do, but what they inconsistently fail to do, comes into the category of their works, and influences their position. It does so in the present, for

no man can cherish such a maimed Christian life as makes such negligence possible without robbing himself of much that would tend to his own growth in grace and likeness to Jesus Christ. The unfaithful servant is poorer by the pound hidden in the napkin which might all the while have been laid out at interest with the money-changers, which would have increased the income whilst the lord was absent. We rob ourselves of blessed sympathies and of the still more blessed joy of service, and of the yet more blessed joy of successful effort, by our indolence and our negligence. Let us not forget that our works do follow us in this life as in the life to come, and that it is here as well as hereafter, that he that goeth forth with a full basket and scatters the precious seed with weeping, and yet with joy, shall doubtless come again bringing his sheaves with him. And if we stretch our view to take in the life beyond, what gladness can match that of the man who shall enter there with some who will be his joy and crown of rejoicing in that day, and of whom he shall be able to say, 'Behold I and the children whom Thou hast given me!'

I venture earnestly to appeal to all my hearers for more faithful discharge of this duty. I pray you to open your ears to hear, and your eyes to see, and your hearts to feel, and last of all, your hands to help, the miseries of the world. Solemn duties wait upon great privileges. It is an awful trust to have Christ and His gospel committed to our care. We get it because from One who lived no life of luxurious ease, but felt all the woes of humanity which He redeemed, and forbore not to deliver us from death, though at the cost of His own. We get it for no life of silken indolence or selfish disregard of the sorrows of our brethren. If there is one

tear we could have dried and didn't, or one wound we could have healed and didn't, that is a sin ; if we could have lightened the great heap of sorrow by one grain and didn't, that is a sin ; and if there be one soul that perishes which we might have saved and didn't, the negligence is not merely the omission of a duty, but the doing of a deed which will be 'rendered to us according to our works.'

### THE SLUGGARD'S GARDEN

'I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding ; 31. And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.'—PROVERBS xxiv. 30, 31.

THIS picture of the sluggard's garden seems to be intended as a parable. No doubt its direct simple meaning is full of homely wisdom in full accord with the whole tone of the Book of Proverbs ; but we shall scarcely do justice to this saying of the wise if we do not see in 'the ground grown over with thorns,' and 'the stone wall thereof broken down,' an apologue of the condition of a soul whose owner has neglected to cultivate and tend it.

I. Note first who the slothful man is.

The first plain meaning of the word is to be kept in view. The whole Book of Proverbs brands laziness as the most prolific source of poverty. Honest toil is to it the law of life. It is never weary of reiterating 'In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread' ; and it condemns all swift modes of getting riches without labour. No doubt the primitive simplicity of life as set forth in this book seems far behind the many ingenuities by which in our days the law is evaded. How much of Stock Exchange speculation and 'Com-

pany promoters' gambling would survive the application of the homely old law?

But it is truer in the inward life than in the outward that 'the hand of the diligent maketh rich.' After all, the differences between men who truly 'succeed' and the human failures, which are so frequent, are more moral than intellectual. It has been said that genius is, after all, 'the capacity for taking infinite pains'; and although that is an exaggerated statement, and an incomplete analysis, there is a great truth in it, and it is the homely virtue of hard work which tells in the long run, and without which the most brilliant talents effect but little. However gifted a man may be, he will be a failure if he has not learned the great secret of dogged persistence in often unwelcomed toil. No character worth building up is built without continuous effort. If a man does not labour to be good, he will surely become bad. It is an old axiom that no man attains superlative wickedness all at once, and most certainly no man leaps to the height of the goodness possible to his nature by one spring. He has laboriously, and step by step, to climb the hill. Progress in moral character is secured by long-continued walking upwards, not by a jump.

We note that in our text 'the slothful' is paralleled by 'the man void of understanding'; and the parallel suggests the stupidity in such a world as this of letting ourselves develop according to whims, or inclinations, or passions; and also teaches that 'understanding' is meant to be rigidly and continuously brought to bear on actions as director and restrainer. If the ship is not to be wrecked on the rocks or to founder at sea, Wisdom's hand must hold the helm. Diligence alone is not enough unless directed by 'understanding.'



## II. What comes of sloth.

The description of the sluggard's garden brings into view two things, the abundant, because unchecked, growth of profitless weeds, and the broken down stone wall. Both of these results are but too sadly and evidently true in regard to every life where rigid and continuous control has not been exercised. It is a familiar experience known, alas! to too many of us, that evil things, of which the seeds are in us all, grow up unchecked if there be not constant supervision and self-command. If we do not carefully cultivate our little plot of garden ground, it will soon be overgrown by weeds. 'Ill weeds grow apace' as the homely wisdom of common experience crystallises into a significant proverb. And Jesus has taught the sadder truth that 'thorns spring up and choke the word and it becometh unfruitful.' In the slothful man's soul evil will drive out good as surely as in the struggle for existence the thorns and nettles will cover the face of the slothful man's garden. In country places we sometimes come across a ruined house with what was a garden round it, and here and there still springs up a flower seeking for air and light in the midst of a smothering mass of weeds. *They* needed no kindly gardener's hand to make them grow luxuriantly; *it* can barely put out a pale petal unless cared for and guarded.

But not only is there this unchecked growth, but 'the stone wall thereof was broken down.' The soul was unfenced. The solemn imperative of duty ceases to restrain or to impel in proportion as a man yields slothfully to the baser impulses of his nature. Nothing is hindered from going out of, nor for coming into, an unfenced soul, and he that 'hath no rule over his own spirit,' but is like a 'city broken down without walls,'

is certain sooner or later to let much go forth from that spirit that should have been rigidly shut up, and to let many an enemy come in that will capture the city. It is not yet safe to let any of the fortifications fall into disrepair, and they can only be kept in their massive strength by continuous vigilance.

### III. How sloth excuses itself.

Our text is followed at the distance of one verse with what seemed to be the words of the sluggard in answer to the attempt to awake him: 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.' They are a quotation from an earlier chapter (ch. vi.) where 'His Laziness' is sent to 'consider the ways of the ant and be wise.' They are a drowsy petition which does not dispute the wisdom of the call to awake, but simply craves for a little more luxurious laziness from which he has unwillingly been aroused. And is it not true that we admit too late the force of the summons and yet shrink from answering it? Do we not cheat ourselves and try to deceive God with the promise that we will set about amendment soon? This indolent sleeper asks only for *a little*: 'A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.' Do we not all know that mood of mind which confesses our slothfulness and promises to be wide awake to-morrow but would fain bargain to be left undisturbed to-day? The call 'Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead!' rings from Christ's lips in the ears of every man, and he who answers, 'I will presently, but must sleep a little longer,' may seem to himself to have complied with the call, but has really refused it. The 'little more' generally becomes *much* more; and the answer 'presently,' alas! too often becomes the answer 'never.' When a man is roused

so as to be half awake, the only safety for him is *immediately* to rise and clothe himself; the head that drowsily droops back on the pillow after he has heard the morning's call, is likely to lie there long. *Now*, not 'by-and-by' is the time to shake off the bonds of sloth to cultivate our garden.

#### IV. How sloth ends.

The sleeper's slumber is dramatically represented as being awakened by armed robbers who bring a grim awakening. 'Poverty' and 'want' break in on his 'folding hands to sleep.' That is true as regards the outward life, where indulgence in literal slothfulness brings want, and the whole drift of things executes on the sluggard the sentence that if 'any man will not work, neither shall he eat.'

But the picture is more sadly and fatally true concerning the man who has made his earthly life 'a little sleep' as concerns heavenly things, and in spite of his beseechings, is roused to life and consciousness of himself and of God by death. That man's 'poverty' in his lack of all that is counted as wealth in the world of realities to which he goes will indeed come as a robber. I would press upon you all the plain question, Is this fatal slothfulness characteristic of me? It may co-exist with, and indeed is often the consequence of vehement energy and continuous work to secure wealth, or wisdom, or material good; and the contrast between a man who is all eagerness in regard to the things that don't matter, and all carelessness in regard to the things that do, is the tragedy of life amongst us. My friend! if *your* garden has been suffered by you to be overgrown with weeds, be sure of this, that one day you will be awakened from the slumber that you would fain continue, and

will find yourself in a life where your 'poverty' will come as a robber and your want of all which *there* is counted treasure 'as an armed man.'

One word more. Christ's parable of the sower may be brought into relationship with this parable: He sows the true seed in our hearts, but when sown, it, too, has to be cared for and tended. If it is sown in the sluggard's garden, it will bring forth few ears, and the tares will choke the wheat.

### AN UNWALLED CITY

'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.'—PROVERBS XXV. 23.

THE text gives us a picture of a state of society when an unwall'd city is no place for men to dwell in. In the Europe of to-day there are still fortified places, but for the most part, battlements are turned into promenades; the gateways are gateless; the sweet flowers blooming where armed feet used to tread; and men live securely without bolts and bars. But their spirits cannot yet afford to raise their defences and fling themselves open to all comers.

We may see here three points: the city defenceless, or human nature as it is; the city defended, human nature as it may be in Christ; the city needing no defence, human nature as it will be in heaven.

#### I. The city defenceless, or human nature as it is.

Here we are in a state of warfare which calls for constant shutting out of enemies. Temptations are everywhere; our foes compass us like bees; evils of many sorts seduce. We can picture to ourselves some little garrison holding a lonely outpost against

lurking savages ready to attack if ever the defenders slacken their vigilance for a moment. And that is the truer picture of human nature as it is than the one by which most men are deluded. Life is not a playground, but an arena of grim, earnest fighting. No man does right in his sleep; no man does right without a struggle.

The need for continual vigilance and self-control comes from the very make of our souls, for our nature is not a democracy, but a kingdom. In us all there are passions, desires, affections, all of which may lead to vice or to virtue: and all of which evidently call out for direction, for cultivation, and often for repression. Then there are peculiarities of individual character which need watching lest they become excessive and sinful. Further, there are qualities which need careful cultivation and stimulus to bring them into due proportion. We each of us receive, as it were, an undeveloped self, and have entrusted to us potential germs which come to nothing, or shoot up with a luxuriance that stifles unless we exercise a controlling power. Besides all this, we all carry in us tendencies which are positively, and only, sinful. There would be no temptation if there were no such.

But the slightest inspection of our own selves clearly points out, not only what in us needs to be controlled, but that in us which is *meant* to control. The will is regal; conscience is meant to govern the will, and its voice is but the echo of God's law.

But, while all this is true, it is too sadly true that the accomplishment of this ideal is impossible in our own strength. Our own sad experience tells us that we cannot govern ourselves; and our observations of our brethren but too surely indicate that they too are the

prey of rebellious, anarchical powers within, and of temptations, against the rush of which they and we are as powerless as a voyager in a bark-canoe, caught in the fatal drift of Niagara. Conscience has a voice, but no hands; it can speak, but if its voice fails, it cannot hold us back. From its chair it can bid the waves breaking at our feet roll back, as the Saxon king did, but their tossing surges are deaf. As helpless as the mud walls of some Indian hill-fort against modern artillery, is the defence, in one's own strength, of one's own self against the world. We would gladly admit that the feeblest may do much to 'keep himself unspotted from the world'; but we must, if we recognise facts, confess that the strongest cannot do all. No man can alone completely control his own nature; no man, unenlightened by God, has a clear, full view of duty, nor a clear view of himself. Always there is some unguarded place:

‘Unless above himself he can  
Erect himself, how mean a thing is man!’

but no man can so lift himself so as that self will not drag him down. The walls are broken down and the troops of the spoilers sack the city.

II. The defended city, or human nature as it may be in Christ.

If our previous remarks are true, they give us material for judging how far the counsels of some very popular moral teachers should be followed. It is a very old advice, ‘know thyself’; and it is a very modern one that

‘Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control  
Lead life to sovereign power.’

But if these counsels are taken absolutely and with-

out reference to Christ and His work, they are 'counsels of despair,' demanding what we cannot give, and promising what they cannot bestow. When we know Christ, we shall know ourselves; when He is the self of ourselves, then, and only then, shall we reverence and can we control the inner man. The city of Mansoul will then be defended when 'the peace of God keeps our hearts and minds in Jesus.'

He who submits himself to Christ is lord of himself as none else are. He has a light within which teaches him what is sin. He has a love within which puts out the flame of temptation, as the sun does a coal fire. He has a motive to resist; he has power for resistance; he has hope in resisting. Only thus are the walls broken down rebuilt. And as Christ builds our city on firmer foundations, He will appear in His glory, and will 'lay the windows in agates, and all thy borders in precious stones.' The sure way to bring our ruined earth, 'without form and void,' into a cosmos of light and beauty, is to open our spirit for the Spirit of God to 'brood upon the face of the waters.' Otherwise the attempts to rule over our own spirit will surely fail; but if we let Christ rule over our spirit, then it will rule itself.

But let us ever remember that he who thus submits to Christ, and can truly say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in *me*,' still needs defence. The strife does not thereby cease; the enemies still swarm; sin is not removed. There will be war to the end, and war for ever; but He will 'keep our heads in the day of battle'; and though often we may be driven from the walls, and outposts may be lost, and gaping breaches made, yet the citadel shall be safe. If only we see to it that '*He* is the glory in the midst of us,' He will be

'a wall of fire round about us.' Our nature as it may be in Christ is a walled city as needing defence, and as possessing the defence which it needs.

III. The city defenceless, and needing no defence; that is, human nature as it will be hereafter.

'The gates shall not be shut day nor night,' for 'everything that defileth' is without. We know but little of that future, what we *do* know will, surely, be theirs who here have been 'guarded by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.' That salvation will bring with it the end for the need of guardianship; though it leaves untouched the blessed dependence, we shall stand secure when it is impossible to fall. And that impossibility will be realised, partly, as we know, from change in surroundings, partly from the dropping away of flesh, partly from the entire harmony of our souls with the will of God. Our ignorance of that future is great, but our knowledge of it is greater, and our certainty of it is greatest of all.

This is what we may become. Dear friends! toil no longer at the endless, hopeless task of ruling those turbulent souls of yours; you can never rebuild the walls already fallen. Give up toiling to attain calmness, peace, self-command. Let Christ do all for you, and let Him in to dwell in you and be all to you. Builded on the true Rock, we shall stand stately and safe amid the din of war. He will watch over us and dwell in us, and we shall be as 'a city set on a hill,' impregnable, a virgin city. So may it be with each of us while strife shall last, and hereafter we may quietly hope to be as a city without walls, and needing none; for they that hated us shall be far away, for between us and them is 'a great gulf fixed,' so that they cannot cross it to disturb us any more; and we shall dwell in the city of



God, of which the name is Salem, the city of peace, whose King is Himself, its Defender and its Rock, its Fortress and its high Tower.

## THE WEIGHT OF SAND

‘The sand is weighty.’—PROVERBS. xxvii. 3.

THIS Book of Proverbs has a very wholesome horror of the character which it calls ‘a fool’; meaning thereby, not so much intellectual feebleness as moral and religious obliquity, which are the stupidest things that a man can be guilty of. My text comes from a very picturesque and vivid description, by way of comparison, of the fatal effects of such a man’s passion. The proverb-maker compares two heavy things, stones and sand, and says that they are feathers in comparison with the immense lead-like weight of such a man’s wrath.

Now I have nothing more to do with the immediate application of my text. I want to make a parable out of it. What is lighter than a grain of sand? What is heavier than a bagful of it? As the grains fall one by one, how easily they can be blown away! Let them gather, and they bury temples, and crush the solid masonry of pyramids. ‘Sand is weighty.’ The accumulation of light things is overwhelmingly ponderous. Are there any such things in our lives? If there are, what ought we to do? So you get the point of view from which I want to look at the words of our text.

I. The first suggestion that I make is that they remind us of the supreme importance of trifles.

If trivial acts are unimportant, what signifies the life of man? For ninety-nine and a half per cent. of every

man's life is made up of these light nothings; and unless there is potential greatness in them, and they are of importance, then life is all 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Small things make life; and if *they* are small, then *it* is so too.

But remember, too, that the supreme importance of so-called trivial actions is seen in this, that there may be every bit as much of the noblest things that belong to humanity condensed in, and brought to bear upon, the veriest trifle that a man can do, as on the greatest things that he can perform. We are very poor judges of what is great and what is little. We have a very vulgar estimate that noise and notoriety and the securing of, not *great* but 'big,' results of a material kind make the deeds by which they are secured, great ones. And we think that it is the quiet things, those that do not tell outside at all, that are the small ones.

Well! here is a picture for you. Half-a-dozen shabby, travel-stained Jews, sitting by a river-side upon the grass, talking to a handful of women outside the gates of a great city. Years before that, there had been what the world calls a great event, almost on the same ground—a sanguinary fight, that had settled the emperorship of the then civilised world, for a time. I want to know whether the first preaching of the Gospel in Europe by the Apostle Paul, or the battle of Philippi, was the great event, and which of the two was the little one. I vote for the Jews on the grass, and let all the noise of the fight, though it reverberated through the world for a bit, die away, as 'a little dust that rises up, and is lightly laid again.' Not the noisy events are the great ones; and as much true greatness may be manifested in a poor woman stitching in her

garret as in some of the things that have rung through the world and excited all manner of vulgar applause. Trifles may be, and often are, the great things in life.

And then remember, too, how the most trivial actions have a strange knack of all at once leading on to large results, beyond what could have been expected. A man shifts his seat in a railway carriage, from some passing whim, and five minutes afterwards there comes a collision, and the bench where he had been sitting is splintered up, and the place where he is sitting is untouched, and the accidental move has saved his life. According to the old story a boy, failing in applying for a situation, stoops down in the courtyard and picks up a pin, and the millionaire sees him through the window, and it makes his fortune. We cannot tell what may come of anything; and since we do not know the far end of our deeds, let us be quite sure that we have got the near end of them right. Whatever may be the issue, let us look after the motive, and then all will be right. Small seeds grow to be great trees, and in this strange and inexplicable network of things which men call circumstances, and Christians call Providence, the only thing certain is that 'great' and 'small' all but cease to be a tenable, and certainly altogether cease to be an important distinction.

Then another thing which I would have you remember is, that it is these trivial actions which, in their accumulated force, make character. Men are not made by crises. The crises reveal what we have made ourselves by the trifles. The way in which we do the little things forms the character according to which we shall act when the great things come. If the crew of a man-of-war were not exercised at boat and fire drill during many a calm day, when all was safe, what

would become of them when tempests were raging, or flames breaking through the bulk-heads? It is no time to learn drill then. And we must make our characters by the way in which, day out and day in, we do little things, and find in them fields for the great virtues which will enable us to front the crises of our fate unblenching, and to master whatsoever difficulties come in our path. Geologists nowadays distrust, for the most part, theories which have to invoke great forces in order to mould the face of a country. They tell us that the valley, with its deep sides and wide opening to the sky, may have been made by the slow operation of a tiny brooklet that trickles now down at its base, and by erosion of the atmosphere. So we shape ourselves—and *that* is a great thing—by the way we do small things.

Therefore, I say to you, dear friends! think solemnly and reverently of this awful life of ours. Clear your minds of the notion that anything is small which offers to you the alternative of being done in a right way or in a wrong; and recognise this as a fact—‘sand is weighty,’ trifles are of supreme importance.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to take this saying as suggesting the overwhelming weight of small sins.

That is only an application in one direction of the general principle that I have been trying to lay down; but it is one of such great importance that I wish to deal with it separately. And my point is this, that the accumulated pressure upon a man of a multitude of perfectly trivial faults and transgressions makes up a tremendous aggregate that weighs upon him with awful ponderousness.

Let me remind you, to begin with, that, properly speaking, the words ‘great’ and ‘small’ should not be

applied in reference to things about which 'right' or 'wrong' are the proper words to employ. Or, to put it into plainer language, it is as absurd to talk about the 'size' of a sin, as it is to take the superficial area of a picture as a test of its greatness. The magnitude of a transgression does not depend on the greatness of the act which transgresses—according to human standards—but on the intensity with which the sinful element is working in it. For acts make crimes, but motives make sins. If you take a bit of prussic acid, and bruise it down, every little microscopic fragment will have the poisonous principle in it; and it is very irrelevant to ask whether it is as big as a mountain or small as a grain of dust, it is poison all the same. So to talk about magnitude in regard to sins, is rather to introduce a foreign consideration. But still, recognising that there is a reality in the distinction that people make between great sins and small ones, though it is a superficial distinction, and does not go down to the bottom of things, let us deal with it now.

I say, then, that small sins, by reason of their numerousness, have a terrible accumulative power. They are like the green flies on our rose-bushes, or the microbes that our medical friends talk so much about nowadays. Like them, their power of mischief does not in the least degree depend on their magnitude, and like them, they have a tremendous capacity of reproduction. It would be easier to find a man that had not done any one sin than to find out a man that had only done it once. And it would be easier to find a man that had done no evil than a man who had not been obliged to make the second edition of his sin an enlarged one. For this is the present Nemesis of all evil, that it requires repetition, partly to still conscience, partly to satisfy excited

tastes and desires; so that animal indulgence in drink and the like is a type of what goes on in the inner life of every man, in so far as the second dose has to be stronger than the first in order to produce an equivalent effect; and so on *ad infinitum*.

And then remember that all our evil doings, however insignificant they may be, have a strange affinity with one another, so that you will find that to go wrong in one direction almost inevitably leads to a whole series of consequential transgressions of one sort or another. You remember the old story about the soldier that was smuggled into a fortress concealed in a hay cart, and opened the gates of a virgin citadel to his allies outside. Every evil thing, great or small, that we admit into our lives, still more into our hearts, is charged with the same errand as he had:—‘Set wide the door when you are inside, and let us all come in after you.’ ‘He taketh with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they dwell there.’ ‘None of them,’ says one of the prophets, describing the doleful creatures that haunt the ruins of a deserted city, ‘shall by any means want its mate,’ and the satyrs of the islands and of the woods join together! and hold high carnival in the city. And so, brethren! our little transgressions open the door for great ones, and every sin makes us more accessible to the assaults of every other.

So let me remind you how here, in these little unnumbered acts of trivial transgression which scarcely produce any effect on conscience or on memory, but make up so large a portion of so many of our lives, lies one of the most powerful instruments for making us what we are. If we indulge in slight acts of transgression be sure of this, that we shall pass from them to far greater ones. For one man that leaps or falls all

at once into sin which the world calls gross, there are a thousand that slide into it. The storm only blows down the trees whose hearts have been eaten out and their roots loosened. And when you see a man having a reputation for wisdom and honour all at once coming crash down and disclosing his baseness, be sure that he began with small deflections from the path of right. The evil works underground; and if we yield to little temptations, when great ones come we shall fall their victims.

Let me remind you, too, that there is another sense in which 'sand is weighty.' You may as well be crushed under a sandhill as under a mountain of marble. It matters not which. The accumulated weight of the one is as great as that of the other. And I wish to lay upon the consciences of all that are listening to me now this thought, that an overwhelming weight of guilt results from the accumulation of little sins. Dear friends! I do not desire to preach a gospel of fear, but I cannot help feeling that, very largely, in this day, the ministration of the Christian Church is defective in that it does not give sufficient, though sad and sympathetic, prominence to the plain teaching of Christ and of the New Testament as to future retribution for present sin. We shall 'every one of us give account of himself to God'; and if the account is long enough it will foot up to an enormous sum, though each item may be only halfpence. The weight of a lifetime of little sins will be enough to crush a man down with guilt and responsibility when he stands before that Judge. That is all true, and you know it, and I beseech you, take it to your hearts, 'Sand is weighty.' Little sins have to be accounted for, and may crush.

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to consider one or two of the plain, practical issues of such thoughts as these.

And, first, I would say that these considerations set in a very clear light the absolute necessity for all-round and ever-wakeful watchfulness over ourselves. A man in the tropics does not say, 'Mosquitoes are so small that it does not matter if two or three of them get inside my bed-curtains.' He takes care that not one is there before he lays himself down to sleep. There seems to be nothing more sad than the complacent, easy-going way in which men allow themselves to keep their higher moral principles and their more rigid self-examination for the 'great' things, as they suppose, and let the little things often take care of themselves. What would you think of the captain of a steamer who in calm weather sailed by rule of thumb, only getting out his sextant when storms began to blow? And what about a man that lets the myriad trivialities that make up a day pass in and out of his heart as they will, and never arrests any of them at the gate with a 'How camest thou in hither?' 'Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves.' Look after your trivial acts, and, take my word for it, the great ones will be as they ought to be.

Again, may not this thought somehow take down our easy-going and self-complacent estimate of ourselves? I have no doubt that there are a number of people in my audience just now who have been more or less consciously saying to themselves whilst I have been going on, 'What have *I* to do with all this talk about sin, sin, sin? I am a decent kind of a man. I do all the duties of my daily life, and nobody can say that the white of my eyes is black. I have done no



great transgressions. What is it all about? It has nothing to do with me.'

Well, my friend! it has this to do with you—that in your life there are a whole host of things which only a very superficial estimate hinders you from recognising to be what they are—small deeds, but great sins. Is it a small thing to go, as some of you do go on from year to year, with your conduct and your thoughts and your loves and your desires utterly unaffected by the fact that there is a God in heaven, and that Jesus Christ died for you? Is that a small thing? It manifests itself in a great many insignificant actions. That I grant you; and you are a most respectable man, and you keep the commandments as well as you can. But 'the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.' I say that that is not a small sin.

So, dear brethren! I beseech you judge yourselves by this standard. I charge none of you with gross iniquities. I know nothing about that. But I do appeal to you all, as I do to myself, whether we must not recognise the fact that an accumulated multitude of transgressions which are only superficially small, in their aggregate weigh upon us with 'a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.'

Last of all, this being the case, should we not all turn ourselves with lowly hearts, with recognition of our transgressions, acknowledging that whether it be five hundred or fifty pence that we owe, we have nothing to pay, and betake ourselves to Him who alone can deliver us from the habit and power of these small accumulated faults, and who alone can lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from off our shoulders? If you irrigate the sand it becomes fruitful soil. Christ

brings to us the river of the water of life; the inspiring, the quickening, the fructifying power of the new life that He bestows, and the sand may become soil, and the wilderness blossom as the rose. A heavy burden lies on our shoulders. Ah! yes! but ‘Behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sins of the world!’ What was it that crushed Him down beneath the olives of Gethsemane? What was it that made Him cry, ‘My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?’ I know no answer but one, for which the world’s gratitude is all too small. ‘The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.’

‘Sand is weighty,’ but Christ has borne the burden. ‘Cast thy burden upon the Lord,’ and it will drop from your emancipated shoulders, and they will henceforth bear only the light burden of His love.

### PORTRAIT OF A MATRON

‘Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. 11. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. 12. She will do him good, and not evil, all the days of her life. 13. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. 14. She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar. 15. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. 16. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. 17. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. 18. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. 19. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. 20. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. 21. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. 23. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. 24. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. 25. Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. 26. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. 27. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. 28. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. 29. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. 30. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. 31. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.’—PROVERBS xxxi. 10-31.

**THIS** description of a good ‘house-mother’ attests the

honourable position of woman in Israel. It would have been impossible in Eastern countries, where she was regarded only as a plaything and a better sort of slave. The picture is about equally far removed from old-world and from modern ideas of her place. This 'virtuous woman' is neither a doll nor a graduate nor a public character. Her kingdom is the home. Her works 'praise her in the gates'; but it is her husband, and not she, that 'sits' there among the elders. There is no sentiment or light of wedded love in the picture. It is neither the ideal woman nor wife that is painted, but the ideal head of a household, on whose management, as much as on her husband's work, its well-being depends.

There is plenty of room for modern ideals by the side of this old one, but they are very incomplete without it. If we take the 'oracle which his mother taught' King Lemuel to include this picture, the artist is a woman, and her motive may be to sketch the sort of wife her son should choose. In any case, it is significant that the book which began with the magnificent picture of Wisdom as a fair woman, and hung beside it the ugly likeness of Folly, should end with this charming portrait. It is an acrostic, and the fetters of alphabetic sequence are not favourable to progress or continuity of thought.

But I venture to suggest a certain advance in the representation which removes the apparent disjointed character and needless repetition. There are, first, three verses forming a kind of prologue or introduction (vers. 10-12). Then follows the picture proper, which is brought into unity if we suppose that it describes the growing material success of the diligent housekeeper, beginning with her own willing

work, and gradually extending till she and her family are well to do and among the magnates of her town (vers. 13-29). Then follow two verses of epilogue or conclusion (vers. 30, 31).

The rendering 'virtuous' is unsatisfactory; for what is meant is not moral excellence, either in the wider sense or in the narrower to which, in reference to woman, that great word has been unfortunately narrowed. Our colloquialism 'a woman of faculty' would fairly convey the idea, which is that of ability and general capacity. We have said that there was no light of wedded love in the picture. That is true of the main body of it; but no deeper, terser expression of the inmost blessedness of happy marriage was ever spoken than in the quiet words, 'The heart of her husband trusteth in her,' with the repose of satisfaction, with the tranquillity of perfect assurance. The bond uniting husband and wife in a true marriage is not unlike that uniting us with God. Happy are they who by their trust in one another and the peaceful joys which it brings are led to united trust in a yet deeper love, mirrored to them in their own! True, the picture here is mainly that of confidence that the wife is no squanderer of her husband's goods, but the sweet thought goes far beyond the immediate application. So with the other general feature in verse 12. A true wife is a fountain of good, and good only, all the days of her life—ay, and beyond them too, when her remembrance shines like the calm west after a cloudless sunset. This being, as it were, the overture, next follows the main body of the piece.

It starts with a description of diligence in a comparatively humble sphere. Note that in verse 13 the woman is working alone. She toils 'willingly,' or, as

the literal rendering is, 'with the pleasure of her hands.' There is no profit in unwilling work. Love makes toil delightful, and delighted toil is successful. Throughout its pages the Bible reverences diligence. It is the condition of prosperity in material and spiritual things. Vainly do men and women try to dodge the law which makes the 'sweat of the brow' the indispensable requisite for 'eating bread.' When commerce becomes speculation, which is the polite name for gambling, which, again, is a synonym for stealing, it may yield much more dainty fare than bread to some for a time, but is sure to bring want sooner or later to individuals and communities. The foundation of this good woman's fortune was that she worked with a will. There is no other foundation, either for fortune or any other good, or for self-respect, or for progress in knowledge or goodness or religion.

Then her horizon widened, and she saw a way of increasing her store. 'She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.' She looks afield, and sees opportunities for profitable exchange. Promptly she avails herself of these, and is at work while it is yet dark. She has a household now, and does not neglect their comfort, any more than she does their employment. Their food and their tasks are both set them in the early morning, and their mistress is up as soon as they. Her toil brings in wealth, and so verse 16 shows another step in advance. 'She considereth a field, and buyeth it,' and has made money enough to stock it with vines, and so add a new source of revenue, and acquire a new position as owning land.

But prosperity does not make her relax her efforts

so we are told again in verses 17-19 of her abridging the hours of sleep, and toiling with wool and flax, which would be useless tautology if there were not some new circumstances to account for the repetition. Encouraged by success, she 'girdeth her loins with strength,' and, since she sees that 'her merchandise is profitable,' she is the more induced to labour. She still works with her own hands (ver. 19). But the hands that are busy with distaff and spindle are also stretched out with alms in the open palm, and are extended in readiness to help the needy. A woman made unfeeling by wealth is a monster. Prosperity often leads men to niggardliness in charitable gifts; but if it does the same for a woman, it is doubly cursed. Pity and charity have their home in women's hearts. If they are so busy holding the distaff or the pen that they become hard and insensible to the cry of misery, they have lost their glory.

Then follow a series of verses describing how increased wealth brings good to her household and herself. The advantages are of a purely material sort. Her children are 'clothed with scarlet,' which was not only the name of the dye, but of the stuff. Evidently thick material only was dyed of that hue, and so was fit for winter clothing, even if the weather was so severe for Palestine that snow fell. Her house was furnished with 'carpets,' or rather 'cushions' or 'pillows,' which are more important pieces of furniture where people recline on divans than where they sit on chairs. Her own costume is that of a rich woman. 'Purple and fine linen' are tokens of wealth, and she is woman enough to like to wear these. There is nothing unbecoming in assuming the style of living appropriate to one's position. Her children and her-

self thus share in the advantages of her industry; and the husband, who does not appear to have much business of his own, gets his share in that he sits among the wealthy and honoured inhabitants of the town, 'in the gates,' the chief place of meeting for business and gossip.

Verse 24 recurs to the subject of the woman's diligence. She has got into a 'shipping business,' making for the export trade with the 'merchants'—literally, 'Canaanites' or Phœnicians, the great traders of the East, from whom, no doubt, she got the 'purple' of her clothing in exchange for her manufacture. But she had a better dress than any woven in looms or bought with goods. 'Strength and dignity' clothe her. 'She laugheth at the time to come'; that is, she is able to look forward without dread of poverty, because she has realised a competent sum. Such looking forward may be like that of the rich man in the parable, a piece of presumption, but it may also be compatible with devout recognition of God's providence. As in verse 20, beneficence was coupled with diligence, so in verse 26 gentler qualities are blended with strength and dignity, and calm anticipation of the future.

A glimpse into 'the very pulse' of the woman's nature is given. A true woman's strength is always gentle, and her dignity attractive and gracious. Prosperity has not turned her head. 'Wisdom,' the heaven-descended virgin, the deep music of whose call we heard sounding in the earlier chapters of Proverbs, dwells with this very practical woman. The collocation points the lesson that heavenly Wisdom has a field for its display in the common duties of a busy life, does not dwell in hermitages, or cloisters, or studies, but may guide and inspire a careful house-

keeper in her task of wisely keeping her husband's goods together. The old legend of the descending deity who took service as a goat-herd, is true of the heavenly Wisdom, which will come and live in kitchens and shops.

But the ideal woman has not only wisdom in act and word, but 'the law of kindness is on her tongue.' Prosperity should not rob her of her gracious demeanour. Her words should be glowing with the calm flame of love which stoops to lowly and undeserving objects. If wealth leads to presumptuous reckoning on the future, and because we have 'much goods laid up for many years,' we see no other use of leisure than to eat and drink and be merry, we fatally mistake our happiness and our duty. But if gentle compassion and helpfulness are on our lips and in our hearts and deeds, prosperity will be blessed.

Nor does this ideal woman relax in her diligence, though she has prospered. Verse 27 seems very needless repetition of what has been abundantly said already, unless we suppose, as before, new circumstances to account for the reintroduction of a former characteristic. These are, as it seems to me, the increased wealth of the heroine, which might have led her to relax her watchfulness. Some slacking off might have been expected and excused; but at the end, as at the beginning, she looks after her household and is herself diligent. The picture refers only to outward things. But we may remember that the same law applies to all, and that any good, either of worldly wealth or of intellectual, moral, or religious kind, is only preserved by the continuous exercise of the same energies which won it at first.

Verses 28 and 29 give the eulogium pronounced by



children and husband. The former 'rise up' as in reverence; the latter declares her superiority to all women, with the hyperbolical language natural to love. Happy the man who, after long years of wedded life, can repeat the estimate of his early love with the calm certitude born of experience!

The epilogue in verses 30 and 31 is not the continuation of the husband's speech. It at once points the lesson from the whole picture for King Lemuel, and unveils the root of the excellences described. Beauty is skin deep. Let young men look deeper than a fair face. Let young women seek for that beauty which does not fade. The fear of the Lord lies at the bottom of all goodness that will last through the tear and wear of wedded life, and of all domestic diligence which is not mere sordid selfishness or slavish toil. The narrow arena of domestic life affords a fit theatre for the exercise of the highest gifts and graces; and the woman who has made a home bright, and has won and kept a husband's love and children's reverence, may let who will grasp at the more conspicuous prizes which women are so eager after nowadays. She has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her. She shall receive 'of the fruit of her hands' both now and hereafter, if the fear of the Lord has been the root from which that fruit has grown; and 'her works shall praise her in the gate,' though she sits quietly in her home. It is well when our deeds are the trumpeters of our fame, and when to tell them is to praise us.

The whole passage is the hallowing of domestic life, a directory for wives and mothers, a beautiful ideal of how noble a thing a busy mother's life may be, an exhibition to young men of what they should seek, and

of young women of what they should aim at. It were well for the next generation if the young women of this one were as solicitous to make cages as nets, to cultivate qualities which would keep love in the home as to cultivate attractions which lure him to their feet.

## ECCLESIASTES; OR, THE PREACHER

### WHAT PASSES AND WHAT ABIDES

‘One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.’—ECCLES. i. 4.

‘And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’—1 JOHN ii. 17.

A GREAT river may run through more than one kingdom, and bear more than one name, but its flow is unbroken. The river of time runs continuously, taking no heed of dates and calendars. The importance that we attach to the beginnings or endings of years and centuries is a sentimental illusion, but even an illusion that rouses us to a consciousness of the stealthy gliding of the river may do us good, and we need all the helps we can find to wise retrospect and sober anticipation. So we must let the season colour our thoughts, even whilst we feel that in yielding to that impulse we are imagining what has no reality in the passing from the last day of one century to the first day of another.

I do not mean to discuss in this sermon either the old century or the new in their wider social and other aspects. That has been done abundantly. We shall best do our parts in making the days, and the years, and the century what they should be, if we let the truths that come from these combined texts sink into and influence our individual lives. I have put them together, because they are so strikingly antithetical,

both true, and yet looking at the same facts from opposite points of view. But the antithesis is not really so complete as it sounds at first hearing, because what the Preacher means by 'the earth' that 'abideth for ever' is not quite the same as what the Apostle means by the 'world' that 'passes,' and the 'generations' that come and go are not exactly the same as the men that 'abide for ever.' But still the antithesis is real and impressive. The bitter melancholy of the Preacher saw but the surface; the joyous faith of the Apostle went a great deal deeper, and putting the two sets of thoughts and ways of looking at man and his dwelling-place together, we get lessons that may well shape our individual lives.

So let me ask you to look, in the first place, at—

I. The sad and superficial teaching of the Preacher.

Now in reading this Book of Ecclesiastes—which I am afraid a great many people do not read at all—we have always to remember that the wild things and the bitter things which the Preacher is saying so abundantly through its course do not represent his ultimate convictions, but thoughts that he took up in his progress from error to truth. His first word is: 'All is vanity!' That conviction had been set vibrating in his heart, as it is set vibrating in the heart of every man who does as he did, viz., seeks for solid good away from God. That is his starting-point. It is not true. All is not vanity, except to some *blasé* cynic, made cynical by the failure of his voluptuousness, and to whom 'all things here are out of joint,' and everything looks yellow because his own biliary system is out of order. That is the beginning of the book, and there are hosts of other things in the course of it as one-sided, as cynically bitter, and therefore superficial. But the end of it is:

'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.' In his journey from the one point to the other my text is the first step, 'One generation goeth, and another cometh: the earth abideth for ever.'

He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs, and therefore ringing hollow to their tread. All depends on the point of view. The strange history of humanity is like a piece of shot silk; hold it at one angle, and you see dark purple, hold at another, and you see bright golden tints. Look from one point of view, and it seems a long history of vanishing generations. Look to the rear of the procession, and it seems a buoyant spectacle of eager, young faces pressing forwards on the march, and of strong feet treading the new road. But yet the total effect of that endless procession is to impress on the observer the transiency of humanity. And that wholesome thought is made more poignant still by the comparison which the writer here draws between the fleeting generations and the abiding earth. Man is the lord of earth, and can mould it to his purpose, but it remains and he passes. He is but a lodger in an old house that has had generations of tenants, each of whom has said for a while, 'It is mine'; and they all have drifted away, and the house stands. The Alps, over which Hannibal stormed, over which the Goths poured down on the fertile plains of Lombardy, through whose passes mediæval emperors led their forces, over whose summits Napoleon brought his men,

through whose bowels this generation has burrowed its tunnels, stand the same, and smile the same amid their snows, at the transient creatures that have crawled across them. The primrose on the rock blooms in the same place year after year, and nature and it are faithful to their covenant, but the poet's eyes that fell upon them are sealed with dust. Generations have gone, the transient flower remains. 'One generation cometh and another goeth,' and the tragedy is made more tragical because the stage stands unaltered, and 'the earth abides for ever.' That is what sense has to say—'the foolish senses'—and that is all that sense has to say. Is it all that can be said? If it is, then the Preacher's bitter conclusion is true, and 'all is vanity and chasing after wind.'

He immediately proceeds to draw from this undeniable, but, as I maintain, partial fact, the broad conclusion which cannot be rebutted, if you accept what he has said in my text as being the sufficient and complete account of man and his dwelling-place. If, says he, it is true that one generation comes and another goes, and the earth abides for ever, and if that is all that has to be said, then all things are full of labour. There is immense activity, and there is no progress; it is all rotary motion round and round and round, and the same objects reappear duly and punctually as the wheel revolves, and life is futile. Yes; so it is unless there is something more to be said, and the life that is thus futile is also, as it seems to me, inexplicable if you believe in God at all. If man, being what he is, is wholly subject to that law of mutation and decay, then not only is he made 'a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death,' but he is also inferior to that persistent, old mother-earth from whose bosom he has

come. If all that you have to say of him is, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,' then life is futile, and God is not vindicated for having produced it.

And there is another consequence that follows, if this is all that we have got to say. If the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes is the ultimate word, then I do not assert that morality is destroyed, because right and wrong are not dependent either upon the belief in a God, or on the belief in immortality. But I do say that to declare that the fleeting, transient life of earth is all does strike a staggering blow at all noble ethics and paralyses a great deal of the highest forms of human activity, and that, as has historically been the case, so on the large scale, and, speaking generally, it will be the case, that the man whose creed is only 'To-morrow we die' will very speedily draw the conclusion, 'Let us eat and drink,' and sensuous delights and the lower side of his nature will become dominant.

So, then, the Preacher had not got at the bottom of all things, either in his initial conviction that all was vanity, or in that which he laid down as the first step towards establishing that, that man passes and the earth abides. There is more to be said; the sad, superficial teaching of the Preacher needs to be supplemented.

Now turn for a moment to what does supplement it.

II. The joyous and profounder teaching of the Apostle.

The cynic never sees the depths; that is reserved for the mystical eye of the lover. So John says: 'No, no; that is not all. Here is the true state of affairs: "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."' The doctrine of the passing generations and the abiding earth is

fronted squarely in my second text by the not contradictory, but complementary doctrine of the passing world and the abiding men. I do not suppose that John had this verse of Ecclesiastes in his mind, for the word 'abide' is one of his favourite expressions, and is always cropping up. But even though he had not, we find in his utterance the necessary correction to the first text. As I have said, and now need not do more than repeat in a sentence, the antithesis is not so complete as it seems. John's 'world' is not the Preacher's 'earth,' but he means thereby, as we all know, the aggregate of created things, including men, considered apart from God, and in so far as it includes voluntary agents set in opposition to God and the will of God. He means the earth rent away from God, and turned to be what it was not meant to be, a minister of evil, and he means men, in so far as they have parted themselves from God and make up an alien, if not a positively antagonistic company.

Perhaps he was referring, in the words of our text, to the break-up of the existing order of things which he discerned as impending and already begun to take effect in consequence of the coming of Jesus Christ, the shining of the true Light. For you may remember that in a previous part of the epistle he uses precisely the same expression, with a significant variation. Here, in our text, he says, 'The world passeth away'; there he says, 'The darkness has passed and the true light now shineth.' He sees a process installed and going on, in which the whole solid-seeming fabric of a godless society is being dissolved and melted away. And says he, in the midst of all this change there is one who stands unchanged, the man that does God's will.

But just for a moment we may take the lower point



of view, and see here a flat contradiction of the Preacher. He said, 'Men go, and the world abides.' 'No,' says John; 'your own psalmists might have taught you better: "As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed."' The world, the earth, which seems so solid and permanent, is all the while in perpetual flux, as our later science has taught us, in a sense of which neither Preacher nor Apostle could dream. For just as from the beginning forces were at work which out of the fire-mist shaped sun and planets, so the same forces, continuing in operation, are tending towards the end of the system which they began; and a contracting sun and a diminished light and a lowered temperature and the narrower orbits in which the planets shall revolve, prophecy that 'the elements shall melt with fervent heat,' and that all things which have been made must one day cease to be. Nature is the true Penelope's web, ever being woven and ever being unravelled, and in the most purely physical and scientific sense the world is passing away. But then, because you and I belong, in a segment of our being, to that which thus is passing away, we come under the same laws, and all that has been born must die. So the generations come, and in their very coming bear the prophecy of their going. But, on the other hand, there is an inner nucleus of our being, of which the material is but the transient envelope and periphery, which holds nought of the material, but of the spiritual, and that 'abides for ever.'

But let us lift the thought rather into the region of the true antithesis which John was contemplating, which is not so much the crumbling away of the material, and the endurance of the spiritual, as the

essential transiency of everything that is antagonism to the will of God, and the essential eternity of everything which is in conformity with that will. And so, says he, 'The world is passing, and the lust thereof.' The desires that grasp it perish with it, or perhaps, more truly still, the object of the desire perishes, and with it the possibility of their gratification ceases, but the desire itself remains. But what of the man whose life has been devoted to the things seen and temporal, when he finds himself in a condition of being where none of these have accompanied him? Nothing to slake his lusts, if he be a sensualist. No money-bags, ledgers, or cheque-books if he be a plutocrat or a capitalist or a miser. No books or dictionaries if he be a mere student. Nothing of his vocations if he lived for 'the world.' But yet the appetite is abiding. Will that not be a thirst that cannot be slaked?

'The world is passing and the lust thereof,' and all that is antagonistic to God, or separated from Him, is essentially as 'a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away,' whereas the man who does the will of God abideth for ever, in that he is steadfast in the midst of change.

'His hand the good man fastens on the skies,  
And lets earth roll, nor heeds its idle whirl.'

He shall 'abide for ever,' in the sense that his work is perpetual. In one very deep and solemn sense, nothing human ever dies, but in another all that is not running in the same direction as, and borne along by the impulse of, the will of God, is destined to be neutralised and brought to nothing at last. There may be a row of figures as long as to reach from here to the fixed stars, but if there is not in front of them the significant digit,

which comes from obedience to the will of God, all is but a string of ciphers, and their net result is nothing. And he 'abideth for ever,' in the most blessed and profound sense, in that through his faith, which has kindled his love, and his love which has set in motion his practical obedience, he becomes participant of the very eternity of the living God. 'This is eternal life,' not merely to know, but 'to do the will' of our Father. Nothing else will last, and nothing else will prosper, any more than a bit of driftwood can stem Niagara. Unite yourself with the will of God, and you abide.

And now let me, as briefly as I can, throw together—

III. The plain, practical lessons that come from both these texts.

May I say, without seeming to be morbid or unpractical, one lesson is that we should cultivate a sense of the transiency of this outward life? One of our old authors says somewhere, that it is wholesome to smell at a piece of turf from a churchyard. I know that much harm has been done by representing Christianity as mainly a scheme which is to secure man a peaceful death, and that many morbid forms of piety have given far too large a place to the contemplation of skulls and cross-bones. But for all that, the remembrance of death present in our lives will often lay a cool hand upon a throbbing brow; and, like a bit of ice used by a skilful physician, will bring down the temperature, and stay the too tumultuous beating of the heart. 'So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.' It will minister energy, and lead us to say, like our Lord, 'We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.'

Let me say again—a very plain, practical lesson is to dig deep down for our foundations below the rubbish

that has accumulated. If a man wishes to build a house in Rome or in Jerusalem he has to go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles and triturated marbles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. We have to drive a shaft clear down through all the superficial strata, and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages. Do not build on that which quivers and shakes beneath you. Do not try to make your life's path across the weeds, or as they call it in Egypt, the 'sudd,' that floats on the surface of the Nile, compacted for many a mile, and yet only a film on the surface of the river, to be swept away some day. Build on God.

And the last lesson is, let us see to it that our wills are in harmony with His, and the work of our hands His work. We can do that will in all the secularities of our daily life. The difference between the work that shrivels up and disappears and the work that abides is not so much in its external character, or in the materials on which it is expended, as in the motive from which it comes. So that, if I might so say, if two women are sitting at the same millstone face to face, and turning round the same handle, one of them for one half the circumference, and the other for the other, and grinding out the same corn, the one's work may be 'gold, silver, precious stones,' which shall abide the trying fire; and the other's may be 'wood, hay, stubble,' which shall be burnt up. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

So let us set ourselves, dear friends! to our several tasks for this coming year. Never mind about the century, it will take care of itself. Do your little work in your little corner, and be sure of this, that amidst changes you will stand unchanged, amidst tumults you

may stand calm, in death you will be entering on a fuller life, and that what to others is the end will be to you the beginning. 'If any man's work abide, he shall receive a reward,' and he himself shall abide with the abiding God.

The bitter cynic said half the truth when he said, 'One generation goeth, and another cometh; but the earth abides.' The mystic Apostle saw the truth steadily, and saw it whole when he said, 'Lo! the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

## THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

'The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.'—ECCLES. i. 9.

'That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. 3. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles.'—1 PETER iv. 2, 3.

IF you will look at these two passages carefully you will, I think, see that they imply two different, and in some respects contradictory, thoughts about the future in its relation to the past. The first of them is the somewhat exaggerated utterance of a dreary and depressing philosophy, which tells us that, as in the outer world, so in regard to man's life, there is an enormous activity and no advance, that it is all moving round like the scenes in some circular panorama, that after it has gone the round back it comes again, that it is the same thing over and over again, that life is a treadmill, so to speak, with an immense deal of working of muscles; but it all comes to nothing over again. 'The rivers run into the sea and the sea is not full, and where the rivers come from they go back to; and the wind goes to the south, turns to the north, and whirls about

continually. Everything is full of labour, and it has all been done before, and there is nothing fresh; everything is flat, stale, and unprofitable.'

Well that is not true altogether, but though it be not true altogether—though it be an exaggeration, and though the inference that is built upon it is not altogether satisfactory and profound—yet the thought itself is one that has a great deal in it that is true and important, and may be very helpful and profitable to us now; for there is a religious way, as well as an irreligious way, of saying there is nothing new under the sun. It may be the utterance of a material, *blasé*, unprofitable, spurious philosophy, or it may be the utterance of the profoundest, and the happiest, and the most peaceful religious trust and confidence.

The other passage implies the opposite notion of man's life, that however much in my future may be just the same as what my past has been, there is a region in which it is quite possible to make to-morrow unlike to-day, and so to resolve and so to work as that 'the time past of our lives' may be different from 'the rest of our time in the flesh'; that a great revolution may come upon a man, and that whilst the outward life is continuous and the same, and the tasks to be done are the same, and the joys the same, there may be such a profound and radical difference in the spirit and motive in which they are done as that the thing that has been is *not* that which shall be, and for us there *may* be a new thing under the sun.

And so just now I think we may take these two passages in their connection—their opposition, and in their parallelism—as suggesting to us two very helpful, mutually completing thoughts about the unknown future that stretches before us—first, the substantial

identity of the future with the past; second, the possible total unlikeness of the future and the past.

First then, let us try to get the impress from the first phrase of that conviction, so far as it is true, as to the sameness of the things that are going to be with the things that have been. The immediate connection in which the words are spoken is in regard, mainly, to the outer world, the physical universe, and only secondarily and subordinately in regard to man's life. And I need not remind you how that thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and the future has gained by the advance of physical science in modern times. It seems to be contradicted no doubt by the continual emergence of new things here and there, but they tell us that the novelty is only a matter of arrangement, that the atoms have never had an addition to them since the beginning of things, that all stand just as they were from the very commencement and foundation of all things, and that all that seems new is only a new arrangement, so that the thing which has been is that which shall be. And then there comes up the other thought, upon which I need not dwell for a moment, that the present condition of things round about us is the result of the uniform forces that have been working straight on from the very beginning. And yet, whilst all that is quite true, we come to our own human lives, and we find there the true application of such words as these: to-morrow is to be like yesterday. There is one very important sense in which the opposite of that is true, and no to-morrow can ever be like any yesterday for however much the events may be the same, we are so different that, in regard even to the most well trodden and beaten of our paths of daily life, we may

all say, 'We have not passed this way before!' We cannot bring back that which is gone—that which is gone is gone for good or evil, irrevocable as the snow or the perfume of last year's flowers. I dare say there are many here before me who are saying to themselves, 'No! life can never again be what life has been for me, and the only thing that I am quite sure about in regard to to-morrow is that it is utterly impossible that it should ever be as yesterday was!' Notwithstanding, the word of my text is a true word, the thing that hath been is that which shall be. I need not dwell on the grounds upon which the certainty rests, such, for instance, as that the powers which shape to-morrow are the same as the powers which shaped yesterday; that you and I, in our nature, are the same, and that the mighty Hand up there that is moulding it is the same; that every to-morrow is the child of all the yesterdays; that the same general impression will pervade the future as has pervaded the past. Though events may be different the general stamp and characteristics of them will be the same, and when we pass into a new region of human life we shall find that we are not walking in a place where no footprints have been before us, but that all about us the ground is trodden down smooth.

'That which hath been is that which shall be.' Thus, while this is proximately true in regard to the future, let me just for a moment or two give you one or two of the plain, simple pieces of well-worn wisdom which are built upon such a thought. And first of all let me give you this, 'Well, then, let us learn to tone down our expectations of what may be coming to us.' Especially I speak now to the younger portion of my congregation, to whom life is beginning, and to whom it is naturally



tinted with roseate hue, and who have a great deal stretching before them which is new to them, new duties, new relationships, new joys. But whilst that is specially true for them it is true for all. It is a strange illusion under which we all live to the very end of our lives, unless by reflection and effort we become masters of it and see things in the plain daylight of common sense, that the future is going somehow or other to be brighter, better, fuller of resources, fuller of blessings, freer from sorrow than the past has been. We turn over each new leaf that marks a new year, and we cannot help thinking: 'Well! perhaps hidden away in its storehouses there may be something brighter and better in store for me.' It is well, perhaps, that we should have that thought, for if we were not so drawn on, even though it be by an illusion, I do not know that we should be able to live on as we do. But don't let us forget in the hours of quiet that there is no reason at all to expect that any of these arbitrary, and conventional, and unreal distinctions of calendars and dates make any difference in that uniform strand of our life which just runs the same, which is reeled off the great drum of the future and on to the great drum of the past, and that is all spun out of one fibre and is one gauge, and one sort of stuff from the beginning to the end. And so let us be contented where we are, and not fancy that when I get that thing that I am looking forward to, when I get into that position I am waiting for, things will be much different from what they are to-day. Life is all one piece, the future and the past, the pattern runs right through from the beginning to the end, and the stuff is the same stuff. So don't you be too enthusiastic, you people who have an eager ambition for social and political advancement. Things

will be very much as they are used to be, with perhaps some slow, gradual, infinitesimal approximation to a higher ideal and a nobler standard; but there will be no jump, no breaks, no spasmodic advance. We must be contented to accept the law, that there is no new thing under the sun. As you would lay a piece of healing ice upon the heated forehead, lay that law upon the feverish anticipations some of you have in regard to the future, and let the heart beat more quietly, and with the more contentment for the recognition of that law.

And then I may say, at the same time, though I won't dwell upon it for more than a moment, let us take the same thought to teach us to moderate our fears. Don't be afraid that anything whatever may come that will destroy the substantial likeness between the past and the future; and so leave all those jarring and terrifying thoughts that mingle with all our anticipations of the time to come, leave them very quietly on one side and say, 'Thou hast been my Help, leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.'

And then there are one or two other points I mean to touch upon, and let me just name them. Do not let us so exaggerate that thought of the substantial sameness of the future and the past as to flatten life and make it dreary and profitless and insignificant. Let us rather feel, as I shall have to say presently, that whilst the framework remains the same, whilst the general characteristics will not be much different, there is room within that uniformity for all possible play of variety and interest, and earnestness and enthusiasm, and hope. They make the worst possible use of this fixity and steadfastness of things who say, as the dreary man at

the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes is represented as saying, that because things are the same as they will and have been, all is vanity. It is not true. Don't let the uniformity of life flatten your interest in the great miracle of every fresh day, with its fresh continuation of ancient blessings and the steadfast mercies of our Lord.

And let us hold firmly to the far deeper truth that the future will be the same as the past, because God is the same. God's yesterday is God's to-morrow—the same love, the same resources, the same wisdom, the same power, the same sustaining Hand, the same encompassing Presence. 'A thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years'; and when we say there is no new thing under the sun let us feel that the deepest way of expressing that thought is, 'Thou art the same, and Thy steadfast purposes know no alteration.'

Turn to the other side of the thought suggested by the second passage of the text. It speaks to us, as I have said, of the possible entire unlikeness between the future and the past. To-morrow is the child of yesterday—granted; 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap'—certainly; there is a persistent uniformity of nature, and the same causes working make the future much of the same general structure as all the past has been—be it so; and yet within the limits of that identity there may be breathed into the self-sameness of to-morrow such an entire difference of disposition, temper, motive, direction of life, that my whole life may be revolutionised, my whole being, I was going to say, cleft in twain, my old life buried and forgotten, and a new life may emerge from chaos and from the dead. Of course, the question, Is such an

alteration possible? rises up very solemnly to men, to most of them, for I suppose we all of us know what it is to have been beaten time after time in the attempt to shake off the dominion of some habit or evil, and to alter the bearing and the direction of the whole life, and we have to say, 'It is no good trying any longer my life must run on in the channel which I have carved for it; I have made my bed and I must lie on it; I cannot get rid of these things.' And, no doubt, in certain aspects, change is impossible. There are certain limitations of natural disposition which I never can overcome. For instance, if I have no musical ear I cannot turn myself into a musician. If I have no mathematical faculty it is no good poring over Euclid, for, with the best intentions in the world, I shall make nothing of it. We must work within the limits of our natural disposition, and cut our coat according to our cloth. In that respect to-morrow will be as yesterday, and there cannot be any change. And it is quite true that character, which is the great precipitate from the waters of conduct, gets rocky, that habits become persistent, and man's will gets feeble by long indulgence in any course of life. But for all that, admitting to the full all that, I am here now to say to every man and woman in this place, 'Friend, you may make your life from this moment so unlike the blotted, stained, faultful, imperfect, sinful past that no words other than the words of the New Testament will be large enough to express the fact. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away."' For we all know how into any life the coming of some large conviction not believed in or perceived before, may alter the whole bias, current, and direction of it; how into any life the coming of a new love not

cherished and entertained before, may ennoble and transfigure the whole of its nature; how into any life the coming of new motives, not yielded to and recognised before, may make all things new and different. These three plain principles, the power of conviction, the power of affection, the power of motive, are broad enough to admit of building upon them this great and helpful and hopeful promise to us all—‘The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles,’ that ‘henceforth we may live the rest of our time in the flesh according to the will of God.’

To you who have been living in the past with little regard to the supreme powers and principles of Christ’s love and God’s Gospel in Him, I bring the offer of a radical revolution; and I tell you that if you like you may this day begin a life which, though it shall be like yesterday in outward things, in the continuity of some habits, in the continuance of character, shall be all under the influence of an entirely new, and innovating, and renovating power. I ask you whether you don’t think that you have had enough, to use the language of my text, in the part of obeying the will of the flesh; and I beseech you that you will let these great principles, these grand convictions which cluster round and explain the cross of Jesus Christ, influence your mind, character, habits, desires, thoughts, actions; that you will yield yourself to the new power of the Spirit of life in Christ, which is granted to us if only we submit ourselves to it and humbly desire it. And to you who have in some measure lived by this mighty influence I come with the message for you and for myself that the time to come may, if we will, be filled very much fuller than it is; ‘To-morrow may be as this day, and much more abundant.’ I believe in a patient,

reflecting, abundant examination of the past. The old proverb says that 'Every man by the time he is forty is either a fool or a physician'; and any man or woman by the time they get ten years short of that age, ought to know where they are weakest, and ought to be able to guard against the weak places in their character. I do not believe in self-examination for the purpose of finding in a man's own character reasons for answering the question, 'Am I a Christian?' But I do believe that no people will avail themselves fully of the power God has given them for making the future brighter and better than the past who have not a very clear, accurate, comprehensive, and penetrating knowledge of their faults and their failures in the past. I suppose if the Tay Bridge is to be built again, it won't be built of the same pattern as that which was blown into the water last week; and you and I ought to learn by experience the places in our souls that give in the tempests, where there is most need for strengthening the bulwarks and defending our natures. And so I say, begin with the abundant recognition of the past, and then a brave confidence in the possibilities of the future. Let us put ourselves under that great renovating Power which is conviction and affection and motive all in one. 'He loved me and gave Himself for me.' And so while we front the future we can feel that, God being in us, and Christ being in us, we shall make it a far brighter and fairer thing than the blurred and blotted past which to-day is buried, and life may go on with grand blessedness and power until we shall hear the great voice from the Throne say, 'There shall be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away,' 'Behold! I make all things new.'

## TWO VIEWS OF LIFE

'This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man, to be exercised therewith.  
—ECCLES. i. 13.

'He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.'—  
HEBREWS xii. 10.

THESE two texts set before us human life as it looks to two observers. The former admits that God shapes it; but to him it seems sore travail, the expenditure of much trouble and efforts; the results of which seem to be nothing beyond profitless exercise. There is an immense activity and nothing to show for it at the end but wearied limbs. The other observer sees, at least, as much of sorrow and trouble as the former, but he believes in the 'Father of spirits,' and in a hereafter; and these, of course, bring a meaning and a wider purpose into the 'sore travail,' and make it, not futile but, profitable to our highest good.

I. Note first the Preacher's gloomy half-truth.

The word rendered in our text 'travail' is a favourite one with the writer. It means occupation which costs effort and causes trouble. The phrase 'to be exercised therewith,' rather means *to fatigue themselves*, so that life as looked upon by the Preacher consists of effort without result but weariness.

If he knew it at all, it was very imperfectly and dimly; and whatever may be thought of teaching on that subject which appears in the formal conclusion of the book, the belief in a future state certainly exercises no influence on its earlier portions. These represent phases through which the writer passes on his way to his conclusion. He does believe in 'God,' but, very significantly, he never uses the sacred name 'Lord.' He has shaken himself free, or he wishes to represent a

character who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life, its meaning and worth, without any help from Law, or Prophet, or Psalm. He does retain belief in what he calls 'God,' but his pure Theism, with little, if any, faith in a future life, is a creed which has no power of unravelling the perplexed mysteries of life, and of answering the question, 'What does it all mean?' With keen and cynical vision he looks out not only over men, as in this first chapter, but over nature; and what mainly strikes him is the enormous amount of work that is being done, and the tragical poverty of its results. The question with which he begins his book is, 'What profit hath a man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?' And for answer he looks at the sun rising and going down, and being in the same place after its journey through the heavens; and he hears the wind continually howling and yet returning again to its circuits; and the waters now running as rivers into the sea and again drawn up in vapours, and once more falling in rain and running as waters. This wearisome monotony of intense activity in nature is paralleled by all that is done by man under heaven, and the net result of all is 'Vanity and a strife after wind.'

The writer proceeds to confirm his dreary conclusion by a piece of autobiography put into the mouth of Solomon. He is represented as flinging himself into mirth and pleasure, into luxury and debauchery, and as satisfying every hunger for any joy, and as being pulled up short in the midst of his rioting by the conviction, like a funeral bell, tolling in his mind that all was vanity. 'He gave himself to wisdom, and madness, and folly'; and in all he found but one result



—enormous effort and no profit. There seemed to be a time for everything, and a kind of demonic power in men compelling them to toil as with equal energy, now at building up, and now at destroying. But to every purpose he saw that there was 'time and judgment,' and therefore, 'the misery of man was great upon him.' To his jaundiced eye the effort of life appeared like the play of the wind in the desert, always busy, but sometime busy in heaping the sands in hillocks, and sometimes as busy in levelling them to a plain.

We may regard such a view of humanity as grotesquely pessimistic; but there is no doubt that many of us do make of life little more than what the Preacher thought it. It is not only the victims of civilisation who are forced to wearisome monotony of toil which barely yields daily bread; but we see all around us men and women wearing out their lives in the race after a false happiness, gaining nothing by the race but weariness. What shall we say of the man who, in the desire to win wealth, or reputation, lives laborious days of cramping effort in one direction, and allows all the better part of his nature to be atrophied, and die, and passes, untasted, brooks by the way, the modest joys and delights that run through the dustiest lives. What is the difference between a squirrel in the cage who only makes his prison go round the faster by his swift race, and the man who lives toilsome days for transitory objects which he may never attain? In the old days every prison was furnished with a tread-mill, on which the prisoner being set was bound to step up on each tread of the revolving wheel, not in order to rise, but in order to prevent him from breaking his legs. How many men around us are on such a mill, and how many of them have fastened themselves on it,

and by their own misreading and misuse of life have turned it into a dreary monotony of resultless toil. The Preacher may be more ingenious than sound in his pessimism, but let us not forget that every godless man does make of life 'Vanity and strife after wind.'

II. The higher truth which completes the Preacher's.

Of course the fragmentary sentence in our second text needs to be completed from the context, and so completed will stand, 'God chastens us for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.' Now let us consider for a moment the thought that the true meaning of life is *discipline*. I say discipline rather than 'chastening,' for chastening simply implies the fact of pain, whereas discipline includes the wholesome *purpose* of pain. The true meaning of life is not to be found by estimating its sorrows or its joys, but by trying to estimate the effects of either upon us. The true value of life, and the meaning of all its tears and of all its joys, is what it *makes* us. If the enormous effort which struck the Preacher issues in strengthened muscles and braced limbs, it is not 'vanity.' He who carries away with him out of life a character moulded as God would have it, does not go in all points 'naked as he came.' He bears a developed self, and that is the greatest treasure that a man can carry out of multitudinous toils of the busiest life. If we would think less of our hard work and of our heavy sorrows, and more of the loving purpose which appoints them all, we should find life less difficult, less toilsome, less mysterious. That one thought taken to our hearts, and honestly applied to everything that befalls us, would untie many a riddle, would wipe away many a tear, would bring peace and patience into many a heart, and would make still brighter many a gladness.

Without it our lives are a chaos; with it they would become an ordered world.

But the recognition of the hand that ministers the discipline is needed to complete the peacefulness of faith. It would be a dreary world if we could only think of some inscrutable or impersonal power that inflicted the discipline; but if in its sharpest pangs we give 'reverence to the Father of spirits,' we shall 'live.' Of course, a loving father sees to his children's education, and a loving child cannot but believe that the father's single purpose in all his discipline is his good. The good that is sought to be attained by the sharpest chastisement is better than the good that is given by weak indulgence. When the father's hand wields the rod, and a loving child receives the strokes, they may sting, but they do not wound. The 'fathers of our flesh chasten us after their own pleasure,' and there may be error and arbitrariness in their action; and the child may sometimes nourish a right sense of injustice, but 'the Father of spirits' makes no mistakes, and never strikes too hard. 'He for our profit' carries with it the declaration that the deep heart of God doth not willingly afflict, and seeks in afflicting for nothing but His children's good.

Nor are these all the truths by which the New Testament completes and supersedes the Preacher's pessimism, for our text closes by unveiling the highest profit which discipline is meant to secure to us as being that we should be 'partakers of His holiness.' The Biblical conception of holiness in God is that of separation from and elevation above the creature. Man's holiness is separation from the world and dedication to God. He is separated from the world by moral perfection yet more than by His other attributes, and

men who have yielded themselves to Him will share in that characteristic. This assimilation to His nature is the highest 'profit' to which we can attain, and all the purpose of His chastening is to make us more completely like Himself. 'The fathers of our flesh' chasten with a view to the brief earthly life, but His chastening looks onwards beyond the days of 'strife and vanity' to a calm eternity.

Thus, then, the immortality which glimmered doubtfully in the end of his book before the eyes of the Preacher is the natural inference for the Christian thought of moral discipline as the great purpose of life. No doubt it might be possible for a man to believe in the supreme importance of character, and in all the discipline of life as subsidiary to its development, and yet not believe in another world, where all that was tendency, often thwarted, should be accomplished result, and the schooling ended the rod should be broken. But such a position will be very rare and very absurd. To recognise moral discipline as the greatest purpose of life, gives quite overwhelming probability to a future. Surely God does not take such pains with us in order to make no more of us than He makes of us in this world. Surely human life becomes 'confusion worse confounded' if it is carefully, sedulously, continuously tended, checked, inspired, developed by all the various experiences of sorrow and joy, and then, at death, broken short off, as a man might break a stick across his knee, and the fragments tossed aside and forgotten. If we can say, 'He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness,' we have the right to say 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

## ‘A TIME TO PLANT’

‘A time to plant.’—ECCLES. iii. 2.

The writer enumerates in this context a number of opposite courses of conduct arranged in pairs, each of which is right at the right time. The view thus presented seems to him to be depressing, and to make life difficult to understand, and aimless. We always appear to be building up with one hand and pulling down with the other. The ship never heads for two miles together in the same direction. The history of human affairs appears to be as purposeless as the play of the wind on the desert sands, which it sometimes piles into huge mounds and then scatters.

So he concludes that only God, who appoints the seasons that demand opposite courses of conduct, can understand what it all means. The engine-driver knows why he reverses his engine, and not the wheels that are running in opposite directions in consecutive moments according to his will.

Now that is a one-sided view, of course, for it is to be remembered that the Book of Ecclesiastes is the log-book of a voyager after truth, and tells us all the wanderings and errors of his thinking until he has arrived at the haven of the conclusion that he announces in the final word: ‘Hear the sum of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.’

I have nothing to do just now with the conclusion which he arrives at, but the facts from which he starts are significant and important. There are things in life, God has so arranged it, which can only be done fittingly, and for the most part of all, at certain

seasons; and the secret of success is the discernment of present duty, and the prompt performance of it.

And this is especially true about your time of life, my young friends. There are things, very important things, which, unless you do them now, the overwhelming probability is that you will never do at all; and the certainty is that you will not do them half as well. And so I want to ask you to look at these words, which, by a legitimate extension of the writer's meaning, and taking them in a kind of parabolic way, may sum up for us the whole of the special duties of youth. 'A time to plant.'

I. Now, my first remark is this: that you are now in the planting time of your lives.

No wise forester will try to shift shrubs or to put them into his gardens or woods, except in late autumn or early spring. And our lives are as really under the dominion of the law of seasons as the green world of the forest and the fields. Speaking generally, and admitting the existence of many exceptions, the years between childhood and, say, two or three-and-twenty, for a young man or woman, for the most part settle the main outline of their character, and thereby determine their history, which, after all, is mainly the outcome of their character.

You have wide possibilities before you, of moulding your characters into beauty, and purity, holiness, and strength.

For one thing, you have got no past, or next to none, written all over, which it is hard to erase. You have substantially a clean sheet on which to write what you like. Your stage of life predisposes you in favour of novelty. New things are glad things to you, whereas to us older people a new thought coming into some of

our brains is like a new bit of furniture coming into a crowded room. All the other pieces need to be arranged, and it is more of a trouble than anything else. You are flexible and plastic as yet, like the iron running out of the blast furnace in a molten stream, which in half an hour's time will be a rigid bar that no man can bend.

You have all these things in your favour, and so, dear young friends, whether you think of it or not, whether voluntarily or not, I want you to remember that this awful process is going on inevitably and constantly in every one of you. You are planting, whether you recognise the fact or no. What are you planting?

Well, for one thing, you are making *habits*, which are but actions hardened, like the juice that exudes from the pine-tree, liquid, or all but liquid, when it comes out, and when exposed to the air, is solidified and tenacious. The old legend of the man in the tower who got a slim thread up to his window, to which was attached one thicker and then thicker, and so on ever increasing until he hauled in a cable, is a true parable of what goes on in every human life. Some one deed, a thin film like a spider's thread, draws after it a thicker, by that inevitable law that a thing done once tends to be done twice, and that the second time it is easier than the first time. A man makes a track with great difficulty across the snow in a morning, but every time that he travels it, it is a little harder, and the track is a little broader, and it is easier walking. You play with the tiger's whelp of some pleasant, questionable enjoyment, and you think that it will always keep so innocent, with its budding claws not able to draw blood, but it grows—it grows. And it grows according

to its kind, and what was a plaything one day is a full-grown and ravening wild beast in a while. You are making habits, whatever else you are making, and you are planting in your hearts seeds that will spring and bear fruit according to their kind.

Then remember, you are planting *belief*.—Most of us, I am afraid, get our opinions by haphazard; like the child in the well-known story, whose only account of herself was that ‘she expected she growed.’ That is the way by which most of you come to what you dignify by the name of your opinions. They come in upon you, you do not know how. Youth is receptive of anything new. You can learn a vast deal more easily than many of us older people can. Set down a man who has never learned the alphabet, to learn his letters, and see what a task it is for him. Or if he takes a pen in his hand for the first time, look how difficult the stiff wrist and thick knuckles find it to bend. Yours is the time for forming your opinions, for forming some rational and intelligent account of yourself and the world about you. See to it, that you plant truth in your hearts, under which you may live sheltered for many days.

Then again, you are planting character, which is not only habit, but something more. You are making *yourselves*, whatever else you are making. You begin with almost boundless possibilities, and these narrow and narrow and narrow, according to your actions, until you have laid the rails on which you travel—one narrow line that you cannot get off. A man’s character is, if I may use a chemical term, a ‘precipitate’ from his actions. Why, it takes acres of roses to make a flask of perfume; and all the long life of a man is represented in his ultimate character. Character is



formed like those chalk cliffs in the south, built up eight hundred feet, beetling above the stormy sea; and all made up of the relics of microscopic animals. So you build up a great solid structure—yourself—out of all your deeds. You are making your character, your habits, your opinions.—And you are making your reputation too. And you will not be able to get rid of that. This is the time for you to make a good record or a bad one, in other people's opinions.

And so, young men and women, boys and girls, I want you to remember the permanent effects of your most fleeting acts. Nothing ever dies that a man does. Nothing! You go into a museum, and you will see standing there a slab of red sandstone, and little dints and dimples upon it. What are they? Marks made by a flying shower that lasted for five minutes, nobody knows how many millenniums ago. And there they are, and there they will be until the world is burned up. So our fleeting deeds are all recorded here, in our permanent character. Everything that we have done is laid up there in the testimony of the rocks:—

‘Through our soul the echoes roll,  
And grow for ever and for ever.’

You are now living in ‘a time to plant.’

II. Notice, in the next place, that as surely as *now* is the time to plant, *then* will be a time to reap.

I do not know whether the writer of my text meant the harvest, when he put in antithesis to my text the other clause, ‘and a time to pluck up that which is planted.’ Probably, as most of the other pairs are opposites, here, too, we are to see an opposite rather than a result; the destructive action of plucking up, and not the preservative action of gathering a harvest.

But, however that may be, let me remind you that there stands, irrefragable, for every human soul and every human deed, this great solemn law of retribution.

Now what lies in that law? Two things—that the results are similar in kind, and more in number. The law of likeness, and the law of increase, both of them belong to the working of the law of retribution. And so, be sure that you will find out that all your past lives on into your present; and that the present, in fact, is very little more than the outcome of the past. What you plant as a youth you will reap as a man. This mysterious life of ours is all sowing and reaping intermingled, right away on to the very end. Each action is in turn the child of all the preceding and the parent of all that follows. But still, though that be true, your time of life is predominantly the time of sowing; and my time of life, for instance, is predominantly the time of reaping. There are a great many things that I could not do now if I wished. There are a great many things in our past that I, and men of my age, would fain alter; but there they stand, and nothing can do away the marks of that which once has been. We have to reap, and so will you some day.

And I will tell you what you will have to reap, as sure as you are sitting in those pews. You will have the enlarged growth of your present characteristics. A man takes a photograph upon a sensitive plate, half the size of the palm of my hand; and then he enlarges it to any size he pleases. And that is what life does for all of us. The pictures, drawn small on the young man's imagination, on the young woman's dreaming heart, be they of angels or of beasts, are permanent; and they will get bigger and bigger and bigger, as you

get older. You do not reap only as much as you sowed, but 'some sixty fold, and some an hundred fold.'

And you will reap the increased dominion of your early habits. There is a grim verse in the Book of Proverbs that speaks about a man being tied and bound by the chains of his sins. And that is just saying that the things which you chose to do when you were a boy, many of them you will have to do when you are a man; because you have lost the power, though sometimes not the will, of doing anything else. There be men that sow the wind, and they do not reap the wind, but the law of increase comes in and they reap the whirlwind. There be men who, according to the old Greek legend, sow dragon's teeth and they reap armed soldiers. There are some of you that are sowing to the flesh, and as sure as God lives, you will 'of the flesh reap corruption.' 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that,' even here, 'shall he also reap.'

And let me remind you that that law of inheriting the fruit of our doings is by no means exhausted by the experience of life. Whenever conscience is awakened it at once testifies not only of a broken law, but of a living Law-giver; and not only of retribution here, but of retribution hereafter. And I for my part believe that the modern form of Christianity and the tendencies of the modern pulpit, influenced by some theological discussions, about details in the notion of retribution that have been going on of late years, have operated to make ministers of the Gospel too chary of preaching, and hearers indisposed to accept, the message of 'the terror of the Lord.' My dear friends! retribution cannot stop on this side of the grave, and if you are going yonder you are carrying with you the necessity in yourself for inheriting the results of your

life here. I beseech you, do not put away such thoughts as this, with the notion that I am brandishing before you some antiquated doctrine, fit only to frighten old women and children. The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes was no weak-minded, superstitious fanatic. He was far more disposed to scepticism than to fanaticism. But for all that, with all his sympathy for young men's breadth and liberality, with his tolerance for all sorts and ways of living, with all his doubts and questionings, he came to this, and this was his teaching to the young men whom in idea he had gathered round his chair,—‘Rejoice, oh young man, in thy youth. And let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes.’ By all means, God has put you into a fair world, and meant you to get all the good out of it. ‘But,’ and that not as a kill-joy, ‘know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment,’ and shape your characters accordingly.

III. Still further, let me say, these things being so, you especially need to ponder them.

That is so, because you especially are in danger of forgetting them. It is meant that young people should live by impulse much more than by reflection.

‘If nature put not forth her power  
About the opening of the flower,  
Who is there that could live an hour?’

The days of calculation will come soon enough; and I do not want to hurry them. I do not want to put old heads upon young shoulders. I would rather see the young ones, a great deal. But I want you not to go down to the level of the beast, living only by instinct and by impulse. You have got brains, you are meant

to use them. You have the great divine gift of reason, that looks before and after, and though you have not much experience yet, you can, if you will, reflect upon such things as I have just been saying to you, and take them into your hearts, and live accordingly. My dear young friend! enjoy yourself, live buoyantly, yield to your impulses, be glad for the beautiful life that is unfolding around you, and the strong nature that is blossoming within you. And then take this other lesson, 'Ponder the path of thy feet,' and remember that all the while you dance along the flowery path, you are planting what you will have to reap.

Then, still further, it is especially needful for you that you should ponder these things, because unless you do you will certainly go wrong. If you do not plant good, somebody else will plant evil. An untilled field is not a field that nothing grows in, but it is a field full of weeds; and the world and the flesh and the devil, the temptations round about you and the evil tendencies in you, unless they are well kept down and kept off, are sure to fill your souls full of all manner of seeds that will spring up to bitterness, and poison, and death. Oh! think, think! for it is the only chance of keeping your hearts from being full of wickedness—think what you are sowing, and think what will the harvest be. There are some of you, as I said, sowing to the flesh, young men living impure and wicked lives, and 'their bones are full of the sins of their youth.' There are some of you letting every wind bring the thistledown of vanities, and scatter them all across your hearts, that they may spring up prickly, and gifted with a fatal power of self-multiplication. There are some of you, young men, and young women too, whose lives are divided between Manchester business

and that ignoble thirst for mere amusement which is eating all the dignity and the earnestness out of the young men of this city. I beseech you, do not slide into habits of frivolity, licentiousness, and sin, for want of looking after yourselves. Remember, if you do not ponder the path of your feet, you are sure to take the turn to the left.

Again, it is needful for you to ponder these things, for if you waste this time, it will never come back to you any more. It is useless to sow corn in August. There are things in this world that a man can only get when he is young, such as sound education, for instance; business habits, habits of industry, of application, of concentration, of self-control, a reputation which may avail in the future. If you do not begin to get these before you are five-and-twenty, you will never get them.

And although the certainty is not so absolute in regard to spiritual and religious things, the dice are frightfully weighted, and the chances are terribly small that a young man who, like some of you, has passed his early years in church or chapel, in weekly contact with earnest preaching, and has not accepted the Saviour, will do it when he grows old. He may; he may. But it is a great deal more likely that he will not.

IV. The conclusion of the whole matter is, Begin on the spot, to trust and to serve Jesus Christ.

These are the best things to plant—simple reliance upon His death for your forgiveness, upon His power to make you pure and clean; simple submission to His commandment. Oh! dear young friend; if you have these in your hearts everything will come right. You will get habit on your side, and that is much; and you

will be saved from a great deal of misery which would be yours if you went wrong first, and then came right.

If you will plant a cutting of the tree of life in your heart it will yield everything to you when it grows. The people in the South Seas, if they have a palm-tree, can get out of it bread and drink, food, clothing, shelter, light, materials for books, cordage for their boats, needles to sew with, and everything. If you will take Jesus Christ, and plant Him in your hearts, everything will come out of that. That Tree 'bears twelve manners of fruits, and yields His fruit every month.' With Christ in your heart all other fair things will be planted there; and with Him in your heart, all evil things which you may already have planted there, will be rooted out. Just as when some strong exotic is carried to some distant land and there takes root, it exterminates the feebler vegetation of the place to which it comes; so with Christ in my heart the sins, the evil habits, the passions, the lusts, and all other foul spawn and offspring, will die and disappear. Take Him, then, dear friend! by simple faith, for your Saviour. He will plant the good seed in your spirit, and 'instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle.' Your lives will become fruitful of goodness and of joy, according to that ancient promise: 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.'

## ETERNITY IN THE HEART

‘He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also He hath set the world in their heart.’—ECCLES. iii. 11.

THERE is considerable difficulty in understanding what precise meaning is to be attached to these words, and what precise bearing they have on the general course of the writer’s thoughts; but one or two things are, at any rate, quite clear.

The Preacher has been enumerating all the various vicissitudes of prosperity and adversity, of construction and destruction, of society and solitude, of love and hate, for which there is scope and verge enough in one short human life; and his conclusion is, as it always is in the earlier part of this book, that because there is such an endless diversity of possible occupation, and each of them lasts but for a little time, and its opposite has as good a right of existence as itself; therefore, perhaps, it might be as well that a man should do nothing as do all these opposite things which neutralise each other, and the net result of which is nothing. If there be a time to be born and a time to die, nonentity would be the same when all is over. If there be a time to plant and a time to pluck, what is the good of planting? If there be a time for love and a time for hate, why cherish affections which are transient and may be succeeded by their opposites?

And then another current of thought passes through his mind, and he gets another glimpse somewhat different, and says in effect, ‘No! that is not all true—God has made all these different changes, and although each of them seems contradictory of the



other, in its own place and at its own time each is beautiful and has a right to exist.' The contexture of life, and even the perplexities and darknesses of human society, and the varieties of earthly condition—if they be confined within their own proper limits, and regarded as parts of a whole—they are all co-operant to an end. As from wheels turning different ways in some great complicated machine, and yet fitting by their cogs into one another, there may be a resultant direct motion produced even by these apparently antagonistic forces.

But the second clause of our text adds a thought which is in some sense contrasted with this.

The word rendered 'world' is a very frequent one in the Old Testament, and has never but one meaning, and that meaning is *eternity*. 'He hath set *eternity* in their heart.'

Here, then, are two antagonistic facts. They are transient things, a vicissitude which moves within natural limits, temporary events which are beautiful in their season. But there is also the contrasted fact, that the man who is thus tossed about, as by some great battledore wielded by giant powers in mockery, from one changing thing to another, has relations to something more lasting than the transient. He lives in a world of fleeting change, but he has 'eternity' in 'his heart.' So between him and his dwelling-place, between him and his occupations, there is a gulf of disproportion. He is subjected to these alternations, and yet bears within him a repressed but immortal consciousness that he belongs to another order of things, which knows no vicissitude and fears no decay. He possesses stifled and misinterpreted longings which, however starved, do yet survive, after unchanging

Being and eternal Rest. And thus endowed, and by contrast thus situated, his soul is full of the 'blank misgiving of a creature moving about in worlds not realised.' Out of these two facts—says our text—man's *where* and man's *what*, his nature and his position, there rises a mist of perplexity and darkness that wraps the whole course of the divine actions—unless, indeed, we have reached that central height of vision above the mists, which this Book of Ecclesiastes puts forth at last as the conclusion of the whole matter—'Fear God, and keep His commandments.' If transitory things with their multitudinous and successive waves toss us to solid safety on the Rock of Ages, then all is well, and many mysteries will be clear. But if not, if we have not found, or rather followed, the one God-given way of harmonising these two sets of experiences—life in the transient, and longings for the eternal—then their antagonism darkens our thoughts of a wise and loving Providence, and we have lost the key to the confused riddle which the world then presents. 'He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also He hath set Eternity in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.'

Such, then, being a partial but, perhaps, not entirely inadequate view of the course of thought in the words before us, I may now proceed to expand the considerations thus brought under our notice in them. These may be gathered up in three principal ones: the consciousness of Eternity in every heart; the disproportion thence resulting between this nature of ours and the order of things in which we dwell; and finally, the possible satisfying of that longing in men's hearts—a possibility not indeed referred to in our text, but

unveiled as the final word of this Book of Ecclesiastes, and made clear to us in Jesus Christ.

I. Consider that eternity is set in every human heart.

The expression is, of course, somewhat difficult, even if we accept generally the explanation which I have given. It may be either a declaration of the actual immortality of the soul, or it may mean, as I rather suppose it to do, the consciousness of eternity which is part of human nature.

The former idea is no doubt closely connected with the latter, and would here yield an appropriate sense. We should then have the contrast between man's undying existence and the transient trifles on which he is tempted to fix his love and hopes. We belong to one set of existences by our bodies, and to another by our souls. Though we are parts of the passing material world, yet in that outward frame is lodged a personality that has nothing in common with decay and death. A spark of eternity dwells in these fleeting frames. The laws of physical growth and accretion and maturity and decay, which rule over all things material, do not apply to my true self. 'In our embers is something that doth live.' Whatsoever befalls the hairs that get grey and thin, and the hands that become wrinkled and palsied, and the heart that is worn out by much beating, and the blood that clogs and clots at last, and the filmy eye, and all the corruptible frame; yet, as the heathen said, 'I shall not *all* die,' but deep within this transient clay house, that must crack and fall and be resolved into the elements out of which it was built up, there dwells an immortal guest, an undying personal self. In the heart, the inmost spiritual being of every man, eternity, in this sense of the word, does dwell.

‘Commonplaces,’ you say. Yes; commonplaces, which word means two things—truths that affect us all, and also truths which, because they are so universal and so entirely believed, are all but powerless. Surely it is not time to stop preaching such truths as long as they are forgotten by the overwhelming majority of the people who acknowledge them. Thank God! the staple of the work of us preachers is the reiteration of commonplaces, which His goodness has made familiar, and our indolence and sin have made stale and powerless.

My brother! you would be a wiser man if, instead of turning the edge of statements which you know to be true, and which, if true, are infinitely solemn and important, by commonplace sarcasm about pulpit commonplaces, you would honestly try to drive the familiar neglected truth home to your mind and heart. Strip it of its generality and think, ‘It is true about *me*. *I* live for ever. My outward life will cease, and *my* dust will return to dust—but *I* shall last undying.’ And ask yourselves—What then? ‘Am I making “provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof,” in more or less refined fashion, and forgetting to provide for that which lives for evermore? Eternity is in *my* heart. What a madness it is to go on, as if either I were to continue for ever among the shows of time, or when I leave them all, to die wholly and be done with altogether!’

But, probably, the other interpretation of these words is the truer. The doctrine of immortality does not seem to be stated in this Book of Ecclesiastes, except in one or two very doubtful expressions. And it is more in accordance with its whole tone to suppose the Preacher here to be asserting, not that the heart

or spirit is immortal, but that, whether it is or no, in the heart is planted the *thought*, the *consciousness* of eternity—and the longing after it.

Let me put that into other words. We, brethren, are the only beings on this earth who can think the thought and speak the word—Eternity. Other creatures are happy while immersed in time; we have another nature, and are disturbed by a thought which shines high above the roaring sea of circumstance in which we float.

I do not care at present about the metaphysical puzzles that have been gathered round that conception, nor care to ask whether it is positive or negative, adequate or inadequate. Enough that the word has a meaning, that it corresponds to a thought which dwells in men's minds. It is of no consequence at all for our purpose, whether it is a positive conception, or simply the thinking away of all limitations. 'I know what God is, when you do not ask me.' I know what eternity is, though I cannot define the word to satisfy a metaphysician. The little child taught by some grandmother Lois, in a cottage, knows what she means when she tells him 'you will live for ever,' though both scholar and teacher would be puzzled to put it into other words. When we say eternity flows round this bank and shoal of time, men know what we mean. Heart answers to heart; and in each heart lies that solemn thought—for ever!

Like all other of the primal thoughts of men's souls, it may be increased in force and clearness, or it may be neglected and opposed, and all but crushed. The thought of God is natural to man, the thought of right and wrong is natural to man—and yet there may be atheists who have blinded their eyes, and there may be

degraded and almost animal natures who have seared their consciences and called sweet bitter and evil good. Thus men may so plunge themselves into the present as to lose the consciousness of the eternal—as a man swept over Niagara, blinded by the spray and deafened by the rush, would see or hear nothing outside the green walls of the death that encompassed him. And yet the blue sky with its peaceful spaces stretches above the hell of waters.

So the thought is in us all—a presentiment and a consciousness; and that universal presentiment itself goes far to establish the reality of the unseen order of things to which it is directed. The great planet that moves on the outmost circle of our system was discovered because that next it wavered in its course in a fashion which was inexplicable, unless some unknown mass was attracting it from across millions of miles of darkling space. And there are ‘perturbations’ in our spirits which cannot be understood, unless from them we may divine that far-off and unseen world, that has power from afar to sway in their orbits the little lives of mortal men. It draws us to itself—but, alas! the attraction may be resisted and thwarted. The dead mass of the planet bends to the drawing, but we can repel the constraint which the eternal world would exercise upon us—and so that consciousness which ought to be our nobleness, as it is our prerogative, may become our shame, our misery, and our sin.

That Eternity which is set in our hearts is not merely the thought of ever-during Being, or of an everlasting order of things to which we are in some way related. But there are connected with it other ideas besides those of mere duration. Men know what

perfection means. They understand the meaning of perfect goodness; they have the notion of infinite Wisdom and boundless Love. These thoughts are the material of all poetry, the thread from which the imagination creates all her wondrous tapestries. This 'capacity for the Infinite,' as people call it—which is only a fine way of putting the same thought as that in our text—which is the prerogative of human spirits, is likewise the curse of many spirits. By their misuse of it they make it a fatal gift, and turn it into an unsatisfied desire which gnaws their souls, a famished yearning which 'roars, and suffers hunger.' Knowing what perfection is, they turn to limited natures and created hearts for their rest. Having the haunting thought of an absolute Goodness, a perfect Wisdom, an endless Love, an eternal Life—they try to find the being that corresponds to their thought here on earth, and so they are plagued with endless disappointment.

My brother! God has put eternity in *your* heart. Not only will you live for ever, but also in your present life you have a consciousness of that eternal and infinite and all-sufficient Being that lives above. You have need of Him, and whether you know it or not, the tendrils of your spirits, like some climbing plant not fostered by a careful hand but growing wild, are feeling out into the vacancy in order to grasp the stay which they need for their fruitage and their strength.

By the make of our spirits, by the possibilities that dawn dim before us, by the thoughts 'whose very sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality,'—by all these and a thousand other signs and facts in every human life we say, 'God has set eternity in their hearts!'

II. And then turn to the second idea that is here. The disproportion between this our nature, and the world in which we dwell.

The writer of this book (whether Solomon or no we need not stay to discuss) looks out upon the world; and in accordance with the prevailing tone of all the earlier parts of his contemplations, finds in this prerogative of man but another reason for saying, 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit.'

Two facts meet him antagonistic to one another: the place that man occupies, and the nature that man bears. This creature with eternity in his heart, where is he set? what has he got to work upon? what has he to love and hold by, to trust to, and anchor his life on? A crowd of things, each well enough, but each having a *time*—and though they be beautiful in their time, yet fading and vanishing when it has elapsed. No multiplication of *times* will make *eternity*. And so with that thought in his heart, man is driven out among objects perfectly insufficient to meet it.

Christ said, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head'—and while the words have their proper and most pathetic meaning in the history of His own earthly life of travail and toil for our sakes, we may also venture to give them the further application, that all the lower creatures are at rest here, and that the more truly a man is man, the less can he find, among all the shadows of the present, a pillow for his head, a place of repose for his heart. The animal nature is at home in the material world, the human nature is not.

Every other creature presents the most accurate correspondence between nature and circumstances,



powers and occupations. Man alone is like some poor land-bird blown out to sea, and floating half-drowned with clinging plumage on an ocean where the dove 'finds no rest for the sole of her foot,' or like some creature that loves to glance in the sunlight, but is plunged into the deepest recesses of a dark mine. In the midst of a universe marked by the nicest adaptations of creatures to their habitation, man alone, the head of them all, presents the unheard-of anomaly that he is surrounded by conditions which do *not* fit his whole nature, which are not adequate for all his powers, on which he cannot feed and nurture his whole being. 'To what purpose is this waste?' 'Hast thou made all men in vain?'

Everything is 'beautiful in its time.' Yes, and for that very reason, as this Book of Ecclesiastes says in another verse, 'Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' It was happy when we loved; but the day of indifference and alienation and separation comes. Our spirits were glad when we were planting; but the time for plucking up that which was planted is sure to draw near. It was blessed to pour out our souls in the effluence of love, or in the fullness of thought, and the time to speak was joyous; but the dark day of silence comes on. When we twined hearts and clasped hands together it was glad, and the time when we embraced was blessed; but the time to refrain from embracing is as sure to draw near. It is good for the eyes to behold the sun, but so certainly as it rolls to its bed in the west, and 'leaves the world to darkness' and to us, do all earthly occupations wane and fade, and all possessions shrivel and dwindle, and all associations snap and drop and end, and the

whirligig of time works round and takes away everything which it once brought us.

And so man, with eternity in his heart, with the hunger in his spirit after an unchanging whole, an absolute good, an ideal perfectness, an immortal being—is condemned to the treadmill of transitory revolution. Nothing continueth in one stay, ‘For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof.’ It is limited, it is changeful, it slips from under us as we stand upon it, and therefore, mystery and perplexity stoop down upon the providence of God, and misery and loneliness enter into the heart of man. These changeful things, they do not meet our ideal, they do not satisfy our wants, they do not last even our duration.

‘The misery of man is great upon him,’ said the text quoted a moment ago. And is it not? Is this present life enough for you? Sometimes you fancy it is. Many of us habitually act on the understanding that it is, and treat all that I have been saying about the disproportion between our nature and our circumstances as not true about them. ‘This world not enough for me!’ you say—‘Yes! it is; only let me get a little more of it, and keep what I get, and I shall be all right.’ So then—‘a little more’ is wanted, is it? And that ‘little more’ will always be wanted, and besides it, the guarantee of permanence will always be wanted, and failing these, there will be a hunger that nothing can fill which belongs to earth. Do you remember the bitter experience of the poor prodigal, ‘*he would fain have filled his belly with the husks*’? He tried his best to live upon the horny, innutritious

poets, but he could not; and after them he still was 'perishing with hunger.' So it is with us all when we try to fill the soul and satisfy the spirit with earth or aught that holds of it. It is as impossible to still the hunger of the heart with that, as to stay the hunger of the body with wise sayings or noble sentiments.

I appeal to your real selves, to your own past experience. Is it not true that, deep below the surface contentment with the world and the things of the world, a dormant but slightly slumbering sense of want and unsatisfied need lies in your souls? Is it not true that it wakes sometimes at a touch; that the tender, dying light of sunset, or the calm abysses of the mighty heavens, or some strain of music, or a line in a book, or a sorrow in your heart, or the solemnity of a great joy, or close contact with sickness and death, or the more direct appeals of Scripture and of Christ, stir a wistful yearning and a painful sense of emptiness in your hearts, and of insufficiency in all the ordinary pursuits of your lives? It cannot but be so; for though it be true that our natures are in some measure subdued to what we work in, and although it is possible to atrophy the deepest parts of our being by long neglect or starvation, yet you will never do that so thoroughly but that the deep-seated longing will break forth at intervals, and the cry of its hunger echo through the soul. Many of us do our best to silence it. But I, for my part, believe that, however you have crushed and hardened your souls by indifference, by ambition, by worldly cares, by frivolous or coarse pleasures, or by any of the thousand other ways in which you can do it—yet there is some response in your truest self to my poor

words when I declare that a soul without God is an empty and an aching soul!

These things which, even in their time of beauty, are not enough for a man's soul—have all but a time to be beautiful in, and then they fade and die. A great botanist made what he called 'a floral clock' to mark the hours of the day by the opening and closing of flowers. It was a graceful and yet a pathetic thought. One after another they spread their petals, and their varying colours glow in the light. But one after another they wearily shut their cups, and the night falls, and the latest of them folds itself together, and all are hidden away in the dark. So our joys and treasures, were they sufficient did they last, cannot last. After a summer's day comes a summer's night, and after a brief space of them comes winter, when all are killed and the leafless trees stand silent,

‘Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.’

We cleave to these temporal possessions and joys, and the natural law of change sweeps them away from us one by one. Most of them do not last so long as we do, and they pain us when *they* pass away from us. Some of them last longer than we do, and *they* pain us when we pass away from them. Either way our hold of them is a transient hold, and one knows not whether is the sadder—the bare garden beds where all have done blowing, and nothing remains but a tangle of decay, or the blooming beauty from which a man is summoned away, leaving others to reap what he has sown. Tragic enough are both at the best—and certain to befall us all. We live and they fade; we die and they remain. We live again and they are far away. The facts are so. We may

make them a joy or a sorrow as we will. Transiency is stamped on all our possessions, occupations, and delights. We have the hunger for eternity in our souls, the thought of eternity in our hearts, the destination for eternity written on our inmost being, and the need to ally ourselves with eternity proclaimed even by the most short-lived trifles of time. Either these things will be the blessing or the curse of our lives. Which do you mean that they shall be for you?

III. These thoughts lead us to consider the possible satisfying of our souls.

This Book of Ecclesiastes is rather meant to enforce the truth of the weariness and emptiness of a godless life, than of the blessedness of a godly one. It is the record of the struggles of a soul—‘the confessions of an inquiring spirit’—feeling and fighting its way through many errors, and many partial and unsatisfactory solutions of the great problem of life, till he reaches the one in which he can rest. When he has touched that goal his work is done. And so the devious way is told in the book at full length, while a sentence sets forth the conclusion to which he was working, even when he was most bewildered. ‘The conclusion of the whole matter’ is ‘Fear God and keep His commandments.’ That is all that a man needs. It is ‘the whole of man.’ ‘All is’ *not* ‘vanity and vexation of spirit’ *then*—but ‘all things work together for good to them that love God.’

The Preacher in his day learned that it was possible to satisfy the hunger for eternity, which had once seemed to him a questionable blessing. He learned that it was a loving Providence which had made man’s home so little fit for him, that he might seek the ‘city which hath foundations.’ He learned that all the pain

of passing beauty, and the fading flowers of man's goodness, were capable of being turned into a solemn joy. Standing at the centre, he saw order instead of chaos, and when he had come back, after all his search, to the old simple faith of peasants and children in Judah, to fear God and keep His commandments, he understood why God had set eternity in man's heart, and then flung him out, as if in mockery, amidst the stormy waves of the changeable ocean of time.

And we, who have a further word from God, may have a fuller and yet more blessed conviction, built upon our own happy experience, if we choose, that it is possible for us to have that deep thirst slaked, that longing appeased. We have Christ to trust to and to love. He has given Himself for us that all our many sins against the eternal love and our guilty squandering of our hearts upon transitory treasures may be forgiven. He has come amongst us, the Word in human flesh, that our poor eyes may see the Eternal walking amidst the things of time and sense, and may discern a beauty in Him beyond 'whatsoever things are lovely.' He has come that we through Him may lay hold on God, even as in Him God lays hold on us. As in mysterious and transcendent union the divine takes into itself the human in that person of Jesus, and Eternity is blended with Time; we, trusting Him and yielding our hearts to Him, receive into our poor lives an incorruptible seed, and for us the soul-satisfying realities that abide for ever mingle with and are reached through the shadows that pass away.

Brethren, yield yourselves to Him! In conscious unworthiness, in lowly penitence, let us cast ourselves on Jesus Christ, our Sacrifice, for pardon and peace! Trust Him and love Him! Live by Him and for Him!

And then, the loftiest thoughts of our hearts, as they seek after absolute perfection and changeless love, shall be more than fulfilled in Him who is more than all that man ever dreamed, because He is the perfection of man, and the Son of God.

Love Christ and live in Him, taking Him for the motive, the spring, and the very atmosphere of your lives, and then no capacities will languish for lack of either stimulus or field, and no weariness will come over you, as if you were a stranger from your home. For if Christ be near us, all things go well with us. If we live for Him, the power of that motive will make all our nature blossom like the vernal woods, and dry branches break into leafage. If we dwell in Him, we shall be at home wherever we are, like the patriarch who pitched his tent in many lands, but always had the same tent wherever he went. So we shall have the one abode, though its place in the desert may vary—and we shall not need to care whether the encampment be beneath the palm-trees and beside the wells of Elim, or amidst the drought of Marah, so long as the same covering protects us, and the same pillar of fire burns above us.

Love Christ, and then the eternity in the heart will not be a great aching void, but will be filled with the everlasting life which Christ gives, and is. The vicissitude will really become the source of freshness and progress which God meant it to be. Everything which, when made our all-sufficient portion, becomes stale and unprofitable, even in its time, will be apparelled in celestial light. It shall all be lovely and pleasant while it lasts, and its beauty will not be saddened by the certainty of its decay, nor its empty place a pain when it has passed away.

Take Christ for Saviour and Friend, your Guide and Support through time, and Himself your Eternity and Joy, then all discords are reconciled—and ‘all things are yours—whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’

### LESSONS FOR WORSHIP AND FOR WORK

‘Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. 2. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. 3. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words. 4. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. 5. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay. 6. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? 7. For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God. 8. If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they. 9. Moreover, the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field. 10. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase. This is also vanity. 11. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? 12. The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.’—ECCLES. v. 1-12.

THIS passage is composed of two or perhaps three apparently disconnected sections. The faults in worship referred to in verses 1-7 have nothing to do with the legalised robbery of verse 8, nor has the demonstration of the folly of covetousness in verses 10-12 any connection with either of the preceding subjects. But they are brought into unity, if they are taken as applications in different directions of the bitter truth which the writer sets himself to prove runs through all life. ‘All is vanity.’ That principle may even be exemplified in worship, and the obscure verse 7 which closes the



section about the faults of worship seems to be equivalent to the more familiar close which rings the knell of so many of men's pursuits in this book, 'This also is vanity.' It stands in the usual form in verse 10.

We have in verses 1-7 a warning against the faults in worship which make even it to be 'vanity,' unreal and empty and fruitless. These are of three sorts, arranged, as it were, chronologically. The worshipper is first regarded as going to the house of God, then as presenting his prayers in it, and then as having left it and returned to his ordinary life. The writer has cautions to give concerning conduct before, during, and after public worship.

Note that, in all three parts of his warnings, his favourite word of condemnation appears as describing the vain worship to which he opposes the right manner. They who fall into the faults condemned are 'fools.' If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance to-day, and seem to haunt long-established Christianity quite as mischievously as they did long-established Judaism. If we could banish them from our religious assemblies, there would be fewer complaints of the poor results of so much apparently Christian prayer and preaching.

Fruitful and acceptable worship begins before it begins. So our passage commences with the demeanour of the worshipper on his way to the house of God. He is to keep his foot; that is, to go deliberately, thoughtfully, with realisation of what he is about to do. He is to 'draw near to hear' and to bethink himself, while drawing near, of what his purpose should be.

Our forefathers' Sunday began on Saturday night, and partly for that reason the hallowing influence of it ran over into Monday, at all events. What likelihood is there that much good will come of worship to people who talk politics or scandal right up to the church door? Is reading newspapers in the pews, which they tell us in England is not unknown in America, a good preparation for worshipping God? The heaviest rain runs off parched ground, unless it has been first softened by a gentle fall of moisture. Hearts that have no dew of previous meditation to make them receptive are not likely to drink in much of the showers of blessing which may be falling round them. The formal worshipper who goes to the house of God because it is the hour when he has always gone; the curious worshipper (?) who draws near to hear indeed, but to hear a man, not God; and all the other sorts of mere outward worshippers who make so large a proportion of every Christian congregation—get the lesson they need, to begin with, in this precept.

Note, that right preparation for worship is better than worship itself, if it is that of 'fools.' Drawing near with the true purpose is better than being near with the wrong one. Note, too, the reason for the vanity of the 'sacrifice of fools' is that 'they know not'; and why do they not know, but because they did not draw near with the purpose of hearing? Therefore, as the last clause of the verse says, rightly rendered, 'they do evil.' All hangs together. No matter how much we frequent the house of God, if we go with unprepared minds and hearts we shall remain ignorant, and because we are so, our sacrifices will be 'evil.' If the winnowing fan of this principle were applied to our decorous congregations, who dress their bodies for

church much more carefully than they do their souls, what a cloud of chaff would fly off!

Then comes the direction for conduct in the act of worship. The same thoughtfulness which kept the foot in coming to, should keep the heart when in, the house of God. His exaltation and our lowliness should check hasty words, blurting out uppermost wishes, or in any way outrunning the sentiments and emotions of prepared hearts. Not that the lesson would check the fervid flow of real desire. There is a type of calm worship which keeps itself calm because it is cold. Propriety and sobriety are its watchwords—both admirable things, and both dear to tepid Christians. Other people besides the crowds on Pentecost think that men whose lips are fired by the Spirit of God are ‘drunken,’ if not with wine, at all events with unwholesome enthusiasm. But the outpourings of a soul filled, not only with the sense that God is in heaven and we on earth, but also with the assurance that He is near to it, and it to Him, are not rash and hasty, however fervid. What is condemned is words which travel faster than thoughts or feelings, or which proceed from hearts that have not been brought into patient submission, or from such as lack reverent realisation of God’s majesty; and such faults may attach to the most calm worship, and need not infect the most fervent. Those prayers are not hasty which keep step with the suppliant’s desires, when these take the time from God’s promises. That mouth is not rash which waits to speak until the ear has heard.

‘Let thy words be few.’ The heathen ‘think that they shall be heard for much speaking.’ It needs not to tell our wants in many words to One who knows them altogether, any more than a child needs many

when speaking to a father or mother. But 'few' must be measured by the number of needs and desires. The shortest prayer, which is not animated by a consciousness of need and a throb of desire, is too long; the longest, which is vitalised by these, is short enough. What becomes of the enormous percentage of public and private prayers, which are mere repetitions, said because they are the right thing to say, because everybody always has said them, and not because the man praying really wants the things he asks for, or expects to get them any the more for asking?

Verse 3 gives a reason for the exhortation, 'A dream comes through a multitude of business'—when a man is much occupied with any matter, it is apt to haunt his sleeping as well as his waking thoughts. 'A fool's voice comes through a multitude of words.' The dream is the consequence of the pressure of business, but the fool's voice is the cause, not the consequence, of the gush of words. What, then, is the meaning? Probably that such a gush of words turns, as it were, the voice of the utterer, for the time being, into that of a fool. Voluble prayers, more abundant than devout sentiments or emotions, make the offerer as a 'fool' and his prayer unacceptable.

The third direction refers to conduct after worship. It lays down the general principle that vows should be paid, and that swiftly. A keen insight into human nature suggests the importance of prompt fulfilment of the vows; for in carrying out resolutions formed under the impulse of the sanctuary, even more than in other departments, delays are dangerous. Many a young heart touched by the truth has resolved to live a Christian life, and has gone out from the house of God and put off and put off till days have thickened

into months and years, and the intention has remained unfulfilled for ever. Nothing hardens hearts, stiffens wills, and sears consciences so much as to be brought to the point of melting, and then to cool down into the old shape. All good resolutions and spiritual convictions may be included under the name of vows; and of all it is true that it is better not to have formed them, than to have formed and not performed them.

Verses 6 and 7 are obscure. The former seems to refer to the case of a man who vows and then asks that he may be absolved from his vow by the priest or other ecclesiastical authority. His mouth—that is, his spoken promise—leads him into sin, if he does not fulfil it (comp. Deut. xxiii. 21, 22). He asks release from his promise on the ground that it is a sin of weakness. The ‘angel’ is best understood as the priest (messenger), as in Malachi ii. 7. Such a wriggling out of a vow will bring God’s anger; for the ‘voice’ which promised what the hand will not perform, sins.

Verse 7 is variously rendered. The Revised Version supplies at the beginning, ‘This comes to pass,’ and goes on ‘through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words.’ But this scarcely bears upon the context, which requires here a reason against rash speech and vows. The meaning seems better given, either by the rearranged text which Delitzsch suggests, ‘In many dreams and many words there are also many vanities’ (so, substantially, the Auth. Ver.), or as Wright, following Hitzig, etc., has it, ‘In the multitude of dreams are also vanities, and [in] many words [as well].’ The simile of verse 3 is recurred to, and the whirling visions of unsubstantial dreams are likened to the rash words of voluble prayers in that both are

vanity. Thus the writer reaches his favourite thought, and shows how vanity infects even devotion. The closing injunction to 'fear God' sets in sharp contrast with faulty outward worship the inner surrender and devotion, which will protect against such empty hypocrisy. If the heart is right, the lips will not be far wrong.

Verses 8 and 9 have no direct connection with the preceding, and their connection with the following (vs. 10-12) is slight. Their meaning is dubious. According to the prevailing view now, the abuses of government in verse 8 are those of the period of the writer; and the last clauses do not, as might appear at first reading, console sufferers by the thought that God is above rapacious dignitaries, but bids the readers not be surprised if small officials plunder, since the same corruption goes upwards through all grades of functionaries. With such rotten condition of things is contrasted, in verse 9, the happy state of a people living under a patriarchal government, where the king draws his revenues, not from oppression, but from agriculture. The Revised Version gives in its margin this rendering. The connection of these verses with the following may be that they teach the vanity of riches under such a state of society as they describe. What is the use of scraping wealth together when hungry officials are 'watching' to pounce on it? How much better to be contented with the modest prosperity of a quiet country life! If the translation of verse 9 in the Authorised Version and the Revised Version is retained, there is a striking contrast between the rapine of the city, where men live by preying on each other (as they do still to a large extent, for 'commerce' is often nothing better), and the wholesome

natural life of the country, where the kindly earth yields fruit, and one man's gain is not another's loss.

Thus the verses may be connected with the wise depreciation of money which follows. That low estimate is based on three grounds, which great trading nations like England and the United States need to have dinned into their ears. First, no man ever gets enough of worldly wealth. The appetite grows faster than the balance at the banker's. That is so because the desire that is turned to outward wealth really needs something else, and has mistaken its object. God, not money or money's worth, is the satisfying possession. It is so because all appetites, fed on earthly things, increase by gratification, and demand ever larger draughts. The jaded palate needs stronger stimulants. The seasoned opium-eater has to increase his doses to produce the same effects. Second, the race after riches is a race after a phantom, because the more one has of them the more people there spring up to share them. The poor man does with one servant; the rich man has fifty; and his own portion of his wealth is a very small item. His own meal is but a small slice off the immense provisions for which he has the trouble of paying. It is so, thirdly, because in the chase he deranges his physical nature; and when he has got his wealth, it only keeps him awake at night thinking how he shall guard it and keep it safe.

That which costs so much to get, which has so little power to satisfy, which must always be less than the wish of the covetous man, which costs so much to keep, which stuffs pillows with thorns, is surely vanity. Honest work is rewarded by sweet sleep. The old legend told of unslumbering guards who kept the treasure of the golden fruit. The millionaire has to

live in a barred house, and to be always on the lookout lest some combination of speculators should pull down his stocks, or some change in the current of population should make his city lots worthless. Black care rides behind the successful man of business. Better to have done a day's work which has earned a night's repose than to be the slave of one's wealth, as all men are who make it their aim and their supreme good. Would that these lessons were printed deep on the hearts of young Englishmen and Americans!

### NAKED OR CLOTHED?

'As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.'—ECCLES. v. 15.

'... Their works do follow them.'—REV. xiv. 13.

It is to be observed that these two sharply contrasted texts do not refer to the same persons. The former is spoken of a rich worldling, the latter of 'the dead who die in the Lord.' The unrelieved gloom of the one is as a dark background against which the triumphant assurance of the other shines out the more brightly, and deepens the gloom which heightens it. The end of the man who has to go away from earth naked and empty-handed acquires new tragic force when set against the lot of those 'whose works do follow them.' Well-worn and commonplace as both sets of thought may be, they may perhaps be flashed up into new vividness by juxtaposition; and if in this sermon we have nothing new to say, old truth is not out of place till it has been wrought into and influenced our daily practice. We shall best gather the lessons of our text if we consider what we must leave, what we must take, and what we may take.



## I. What we must leave.

The Preacher in the context presses home a formidable array of the limitations and insufficiencies of wealth. Possessed, it cannot satisfy, for the appetite grows with indulgence. Its increase barely keeps pace with the increase of its consumers. It contributes nothing to the advantage of its so-called owner except 'the beholding of it with his eyes,' and the need of watching it keeps them open when he would fain sleep. It is often kept to the owner's hurt, it often disappears in unfortunate speculation, and the possessor's heirs are paupers. But, even if all these possibilities are safely weathered, the man has to die and leave it all behind. 'He shall take nothing of his labour which he can carry away in his hand'; that is to say, death separates from all with whom the life of the body brings us into connection. The things which are no parts of our true selves are ours in a very modified sense even whilst we seem to possess them, and the term of possession has a definite close. 'Shrouds have no pockets,' as the stern old proverb says. How many men have lived in the houses which we call ours, sat on our seats, walked over our lands, carried in their purses the money that is in ours! Is 'the game worth the candle' when we give our labour for so imperfect and brief a possession as at the fullest and the longest we enjoy of all earthly good? Surely a wise man will set little store by possessions of all which a cold, irresistible hand will come to strip him. Surely the life is wasted which spends its energy in robing itself in garments which will all be stripped from it when the naked self, 'returns to go as he came.'

But there are other things than these earthly possessions from which death separates us. It carries us

far away from the sound of human voices and isolates us from living men. Honour and reputation cease to be audible. When a prominent man dies, what a clatter of conflicting judgments contends over his grave! and how utterly he is beyond them all! Praise or blame, blessing or banning are equally powerless to reach the unhearing ear or to agitate the unbeating heart. And when one of our small selves passes out of life, we hear no more the voice of censure or of praise, of love or of hate. Is it worth while to toil for the 'hollow wraith of dying fame,' or even for the clasp of loving hands which have to be loosened so surely and so soon?

Then again, there are other things which must be left behind as belonging only to the present order, and connected with bodily life. There will be no scope for material work, and much of all our knowledge will be antiquated when the light beyond shines in. As we shall have occasion to see presently, there is a permanent element in the most material work, and if in handling the transient we have been living for the eternal, such work will abide; but if we think of the spirit in which a sad majority do their daily tasks, whether of a more material or of a more intellectual sort, we must recognise that a very large proportion of all the business of life must come to an end here. There is nothing in it that will stand the voyage across the great deep, or that can survive in the order of things to which we go. What is a man to do in another world, supposing there is another world, where ledgers and mills are out of date? Or what has a scholar or scientist to do in a state of things where there is no place for dictionaries and grammars, for acute criticism, or for a careful scientific research?

Physical science, linguistic knowledge, political wisdom, will be antiquated. The poetry which glorifies afresh and interprets the present will have lost its meaning. Half the problems that torture us here will cease to have existence, and most of the other half will have been solved by simple change of position. 'Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away'; and it becomes us all to bethink ourselves whether there is anything in our lives that we can carry away when all that is 'of the earth earthy' has sunk into nothingness.

## II. What we must take.

We must take *ourselves*. It is the same 'he' who goes 'naked as he came'; it is the same 'he' who 'came from his mother's womb,' and is 'born again' as it were into a new life, only 'he' has by his earthly life been developed and revealed. The plant has flowered and fruited. What was mere potentiality has become fact. There is now fixed character. The transient possessions, relationships, and occupations of the earthly life are gone, but the man that they have made is there. And in the character there are predominant habits which insist upon having their sway, and a memory of which, as we may believe, there is written indelibly all the past. Whatever death may strip from us, there is no reason to suppose that it touches the consciousness and personal identity, or the prevailing set and inclination of our characters. And if we do indeed pass into another life 'not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,' but carrying a perfected memory and clothed in a garment woven of all our past actions, there needs no more to bring about a solemn and continuous act of judgment.

## III. What we may take.

‘Their works do follow them.’ These are the words of the Spirit concerning ‘the dead who die in the Lord.’ We need not fear marring the great truth that ‘not by works of righteousness but by His mercy He saved us,’ if we firmly grasp the large assurance which this text blessedly contains. A Christian man’s works are perpetual in the measure in which they harmonise with the divine will, in the measure they have eternal consequences in himself whatever they may have on others. If we live opening our minds and hearts to the influx of the divine power ‘that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure,’ then we may be humbly sure that these ‘works’ are eternal; and though they will never constitute the ground of our acceptance, they will never fail to secure ‘a great recompence of reward.’ To many a humble saint there will be a moment of wondering thankfulness when he sees these his ‘children whom God hath given him’ clustered round him, and has to say, ‘Lord, when saw I Thee naked, or in prison, and visited Thee?’ There will be many an apocalypse of grateful surprise in the revelations of the heavens. We remember Milton’s noble explanation of these great words which may well silence our feeble attempts to enforce them—

‘Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavour  
Stood not behind, nor in the grave were trod,  
But as faith pointed with her golden rod,  
Followed them up to joy and bliss for ever.’

So then, life here and yonder will for the Christian soul be one continuous whole, only that there, while ‘their works do follow them,’ ‘they rest from their labours.’

## FINIS CORONAT OPUS

'Better is the end of a thing than the beginning.'—ECCLES. vii. 8.

THIS Book of Ecclesiastes is the record of a quest after the chief good. The Preacher tries one thing after another, and tells his experiences. Amongst these are many blunders. It is the final lesson which he would have us learn, not the errors through which he reached it. 'The conclusion of the whole matter' is what he would commend to us, and to it he cleaves his way through a number of bitter exaggerations and of partial truths and of unmingled errors. The text is one of a string of paradoxical sayings, some of them very true and beautiful, some of them doubtful, but all of them the kind of things which used-up men are wont to say—the salt which is left in the pool when the tide is gone down. The text is the utterance of a wearied man who has had so many disappointments, and seen so many fair beginnings overclouded, and so many ships going out of port with flying flags and foundering at sea, that he thinks nothing good till it is ended; little worth beginning—rest and freedom from all external cares and duties best; and, best of all, to be dead, and have done with the whole coil. Obviously, 'the end of a thing' here is the parallel to 'the day of death' in verse 1, which is there preferred to 'the day of one's birth.' That is the godless, worn-out worlding's view of the matter, which is infinitely sad, and absolutely untrue.

But from another point of view there is a truth in these words. The life which is lived for God, which is rooted in Christ, a life of self-denial, of love, of purity, of strenuous 'pressing towards the mark,' is better in its

‘end’ than in its ‘beginning.’ To such a life we are all called, and it is possible for each. May my poor words help some of us to make it ours.

I. Then our life has an end.

It is hard for any of us to realise this in the midst of the rush and pressure of daily duty; and it is not altogether wholesome to think much about it; but it is still more harmful to put it out of our sight, as so many of us do, and to go on habitually as if there would never come a time when we shall cease to be where we have been so long, and when there will no more arise the daily calls to transitory occupations. The thought of the certainty and nearness of that end has often become a stimulus to wild, sensuous living, as the history of the relaxation of morality in pestilences, and in times when war stalked through the land, has abundantly shown. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,’ is plainly a way of reasoning that appeals to the average man. But the entire forgetfulness that there is an end is no less harmful, and is apt to lead to over-indulgence in sensuous desires as the other extreme. Perhaps the young need more especially to be recalled to the thought of the ‘end,’ because they are more especially likely to forget it, and because it is specially worth their while to remember it. They have still the long stretch before the ‘end’ before them, to make of it what they will. Whereas for us who are further on in the course, there is less time and opportunity to shape our path with a view to its close, and to those of us in old age, there is but little need to preach remembrance of what has come so close to us. It is to the young man that the Preacher proffers his final advice, to ‘rejoice in his health, and to walk in the ways of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes,’ but

withal to know that 'for these God will bring him into judgment.'

And in that counsel is involved the thought that 'the end which is better than the beginning' is neither old age, with its limitations and compulsory abstinences, nor death, which is, as the dreary creed of the book in its central portions believes it to be, the close of all things, but, beyond these, the state in which men will reap as they have sown, and inherit what they have earned. It is that condition which gives all its importance to death—the porter who opens the door into a future life of recompence.

II. The end will, in many respects, not be better than the beginning.

Put side by side the infant and the old man. Think of the undeveloped strength, the smooth cheek, the ruddy complexion, the rejoicing in physical well-being, of the one, with the failing senses, the tottering limbs, the lowered vitality, the many pains and aches, of the other. In these respects the end is worse than the beginning. Or go a step further onwards in life, and think of youth, with its unworn energy, and the wearied longing for rest which comes at the end; of youth, with its quick, open receptiveness for all impressions, and the horny surface of callousness which has overgrown the mind of the old; of youth, with its undeveloped powers and endless possibilities, which in the old have become rigid and fixed; of youth, with the rich gift before it of a continent of time, which in the old has been washed away by the ocean, till there is but a crumbling bank still to stand on; of youth, with its wealth of hopes, and of the hopes of the old, which are solemn ventures, few and scanty—and then say if the end is not worse than the beginning.

And if we go further, and think of death as the end, is it not in a very real and terrible sense, loss, loss? It is loss to be taken out of the world, to 'leave the warm precincts and the cheerful day,' to lose friends and lovers, and to be banned into a dreary land. Yet, further, the thought of the end as being a state of retribution strikes upon all hearts as being solemn and terrible.

III. Yet the end may be better.

The sensuous indulgence which Ecclesiastes preaches in its earlier portions will never lead to such an end. It breeds disgust of life, as the examples of *roués* in all ages, and to-day, abundantly shows. Epicurean selfishness leads to weariness of all effort and work. If we are unwise enough to make either of these our guides in life, the only desirable end will be the utter cessation of being and consciousness.

But there is a better sense in which this paradoxical saying is simple truth, and that sense is one which it is possible for us all to realise. What sort of end would that be, the brightness of which would far outshine the joy when a man-child is born into the world? Would it not be a birth into a better life than that which fills and often disturbs the 'threescore years and ten' here? Would it not be an end to a course in which all our nature would be fully developed and all opportunities of growth and activity had been used to the full? which had secured all that we could possess? which had happy memories and calm hopes? Would it not be an end which brought with it communion with the Highest—joys that could never fade, activities that could never weary? Surely the Christian heaven is better than earth; and that heaven may be ours.

That supreme and perfect end will be reached by us



through faith in Christ, and through union by faith with Him. If we are joined to the Lord and are one with Him, our end in glory will be as much better than this our beginning on earth as the full glory of a summer's day transcends the fogs and frosts of dreary winter. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'

If the end is not better than the beginning, it will be infinitely worse. Golden opportunities will be gone; wasted years will be irrevocable. Bright lights will be burnt out; sin will be graven on the memory; remorse will be bitter; evil habits which cannot be gratified will torment; a wearied soul, a darkened understanding, a rebellious heart, will make the end awfully, infinitely, always worse than the beginning. From all these Jesus Christ can save us; and, full as He fills the cup of life as we travel along the road, He keeps the best wine till the last, and makes 'the end of a thing better than the beginning.'

### MISUSED RESPITE

'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.'—ECCLES. viii. 11.

WHEN the Pharaoh of the Exodus saw there was respite, he hardened his heart. Abject in his fear before Moses, he was ready to promise anything; insolent in his pride, he swallows down his promises as soon as fear is eased, his repentance and his retraction of it combined to add new weights about his neck. He was but a conspicuous example of a universal fault. Every nation, I suppose, has its proverb scoffing at the contrast between the sick man's vow and the recovered

man's sins. The bitter moralist of the Old Testament was sure not to let such an instance of man's inconceivable levity pass unnoticed. His settled habit of dragging to light the seamy side of human nature was sure to fall on this illustration of it as congenial food. He has wrapped up here in these curt, bitter words a whole theory of man's condition, of God's providence, of its abuse, and of the end to which it all tends.

I. Note the delay in executing sentence.

Every 'evil work' is already sentenced. 'He that believeth not,' said Christ, 'is condemned already'; and that is one case of a general truth. The text writes the sentence as passed, though the execution is for a time suspended. What is the underlying fact expressed by this metaphor? God's thorough knowledge of, and displeasure at, every evil. When one sees vile things done on earth, and no bolt coming out of the clear sky, it is not easy to believe that all the foulness is known to God; but His eye reaches further than He wills to stretch His arm. He sits a silent Onlooker and beholds; the silence does not argue indifference. The sentence is pronounced, but the execution is delayed. It is not wholly delayed, for there are consequences which immediately dog our evil deeds, and are, as it were, premonitions of a yet more complete penalty. But in the present order of things the connection between a man's evil-doing and suffering is, on the whole, slight, obscure, and partial. Evil triumphs; goodness not seldom suffers. If one thinks for a moment of the manifold evils of the world, which swathe it, as it were, in an atmosphere of woe—the wars, the slavery, the oppressions, the private sorrows—and then thinks that there is a God who lets all these go on from generation to generation, we seem to be in the presence

of a mystery of mysteries. The Psalmist of old exclaimed in adoring wonder, 'Thy judgments are a great deep'; but the absence of His judgments seems to open a profounder abyss into which even the great mountains of His righteousness appear in danger of falling.

## II. The reasons for this delay.

It is not only a mystery, but it is a 'mystery of love.' We can see but a little way into it, but we can see so far as to be sure that the apparent passivity of God, which looks like leaving evil to work its unhindered will, is the silence of a God who 'doth not willingly afflict,' and is 'slow to anger,' because He is perfect love.

The ground of necessity for the delay in executing the sentence lies, partly, in the probationary character of this present life. If evil-doing was always followed by swift retribution, obedience would be only the obedience of fear, and God does not desire such obedience. It would be impossible that testing could go on at all if at every instant the whole of the consequences of our actions were being realised. Such a condition of things is unthinkable, and would be as confusing, in the moral sphere, as if harvest weather and spring weather were going on together. Again, the great reason why sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily lies in God's own heart, and His desire to win us to Himself by benefits. He does not seek enforced obedience; He neither desires our being wedded to evil, nor our being weighed upon by the consequences of our sin, and so He holds back His hand. It is to be remembered that He not merely does thus restrain the forthcoming of His hand of judgment, but, instead of it, puts forth a hand of blessing. He moves around us wooing us to Himself, and, in patience

possessing His spirit, marks all our sins, but loves and blesses still. He gives us the vineyard, though we do not give Him the fruit. Still He is not angry, but sends His messengers, and we stone them. Still He waits: we go on heaping year upon year of rebellious forgetfulness, and no lightning flashes from His eye, no exclamation of wearied-out patience, comes from His lips, no rush of the sudden arrow from His long-stretched bow. The endless patience of God has no explanation but only this, that He loves us too well to leave any means untried to bring us to Him, and that He lingers round us to win our hearts. O rare and unspeakable love, the patient love of the patient God!

### III. The abuse of this delay.

We have the knack of turning God's pure gifts into poison, and practise a devilish chemistry by which we distil venom from the flowers of Eden and the roses of the garden of God. I don't suppose that to many men the respite which marks God's dealing with them actually tends to doubts of His righteousness, or of His power, or of His being. We have evidence enough of these; and the apparently counter evidence, arising from the impunity of evil-doers, is fairly enough laid aside by our moral instincts and consciousness, and by the consideration that the mighty sweep of God's providence is too great for us to decide on the whole circle by the small portion of the circumference which we have seen. But what most men do is simply that they permit impunity to deaden their sense of right and wrong, and go on in their course without any serious thought of God's blessings, to jostle Him out of their mind; they '*despise* the riches of His long-suffering goodness,' and never suffer it to 'lead them to repentance.' To the unthinking minds of most of us,

the long continuance of impunity lulls us into a dream of its perpetuity. Man's godless ingratitude is as deep a mystery as is God's loving patience. It is strange that, with such constant failure of His love to win, God should still persevere in it. For more than seventy times seven He persists in forgiving the rebellious child who sins against Him, and for more than seventy times seven the child persists in the abuse of the Father's love, which still remains—an abuse of sin above all sins.

#### IV. The end of the delay.

The sentence *is* passed. It is impossible that it should not be executed. When God has done all, and sees that the point of hopelessness is reached, or when the time has for other reasons come, then He lets the sentence take effect. He kept back the destroying angels from Sodom, but He sent them forth at last. There is a point in the history of nations and of men when iniquity is 'full,' and when God sees that it is best, on world-wide grounds or personal ones, to end it. So there come for nations and for individuals crises; and the law for the divine working is, 'A short work will the Lord make on the earth.' For long years Noah was building the ark, and exposed to the scoffs of a generation whose sentence had been pronounced and not yet executed; but the day came when he entered into its covert, and 'the flood came and destroyed them all.' For generations He would fain have gathered the people of Jerusalem to His bosom 'as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and they would not'; but the day came when the Roman soldiers cast their torches into the beautiful house where their fathers had praised Him, and sinned against Him, and it was left unto them desolate. Let us not be high-minded nor victims of our levity and inconsiderateness, but fear.

Let us remember too that the intensity of the execution is aggravated by all the sins committed during the delay. By them we 'treasure wrath against the day of wrath.' He says to His angels at last 'Now,' and the sword falls, and justice is done. 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.' The sum of the whole matter is, every evil of ours is sentenced already; the punishment is delayed for our sins, and because Christ has died. God is wooing our hearts, and trying to win us to love Him by the holding back of the sentence which we are daily abusing. Shall we not accept His forbearance and take His gifts as tokens of the patient tenderness of His heart? Or are we to be like 'the brutes that perish,' knowing neither the hand that feeds them, nor the hand that kills them. The delay in rendering 'the just recompence of reward' only aggravates its weight when it falls. As in some levers, the slower the motion, the greater the force of the lift.

### FENCES AND SERPENTS

'... Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.'—ECCLES. X. 8.

WHAT is meant here is, probably, not such a hedge as we are accustomed to see, but a dry-stone wall, or, perhaps, an earthen embankment, in the crevices of which might lurk a snake to sting the careless hand. The connection and purpose of the text are somewhat obscure. It is one of a string of proverb-like sayings which all seem to be illustrations of the one thought that every kind of work has its own appropriate and peculiar peril. So, says the Preacher, if a man is digging a pit, the sides of it may cave in and he may go

down. If he is pulling down a wall he may get stung. If he is working in a quarry there may be a fall of rock. If he is a woodman the tree he is felling may crush him. What then? Is the inference to be, Sit still and do nothing, because you may get hurt whatever you do? By no means. The writer of this book hates idleness very nearly as much as he does what he calls 'folly,' and his inference is stated in the next verse—'Wisdom is profitable to direct.' That is to say, since all work has its own dangers, work warily, and with your brains as well as your muscles, and do not put your hand into the hollow in the wall, until you have looked to see whether there are any snakes in it. Is that very wholesome maxim of prudence all that is meant to be learned? I think not. The previous clause, at all events, embodies a well-known metaphor of the Old Testament. 'He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it,' often occurs as expressing the retribution in kind that comes down on the cunning plotter against other men's prosperity, and the conclusion that wisdom suggests in that application of the sentence is, *not* 'Dig judiciously,' but 'Do not dig at all.' And so in my text the 'wall' may stand for the limitations and boundary-lines of our lives, and the inference that wisdom suggests in that application of the saying is not 'Pull down judiciously,' but 'Keep the fence up, and be sure you keep on the right side of it.' For any attempt to pull it down—which being interpreted is, to transgress the laws of life which God has enjoined—is sure to bring out the hissing snake with its poison.

Now it is in that aspect that I want to look at the words before us.

I. First of all, let us take that thought which underlies my text—that all life is given us rigidly walled up.

The first thing that the child learns is, that it must not do what it likes. The last lesson that the old man has to learn is, you must do what you ought. And between these two extremes of life we are always making attempts to treat the world as an open common, on which we may wander at our will. And before we have gone many steps, some sort of keeper or other meets us and says to us, 'Trespassers, back again to the road!' Life is rigidly hedged in and limited. To live as you like is the prerogative of a brute. To live as you ought, and to recognise and command by obeying the laws and limitations stamped upon our very nature and enjoined by our circumstances, is the freedom and the glory of a man. There are limitations, I say—fences on all sides. Men put up their fences; and they are often like the wretched wooden hoardings that you sometimes see limiting the breadth of a road. But in regard to these conventional limitations and regulations, which own no higher authority or law-giver than society and custom, you must make up your mind even more certainly than in regard of loftier laws, that if you meddle with them, there will be plenty of serpents coming out to hiss and bite. No man that defies the narrow maxims and petty restrictions of conventional ways, and sets at nought the opinions of the people round about him, but must make up his mind for backbiting and slander and opposition of all sorts. It is the price that we pay for obeying at first hand the laws of God and caring nothing for the conventionalities of men.

But apart from that altogether, let me just remind you, in half a dozen sentences, of the various limitations or fences which hedge up our lives on every side. There are the obligations which we owe, and the rela-



tions in which we stand, to the outer world, the laws of physical life, and all that touches the external and the material. There are the relations in which we stand, and the obligations which we owe, to ourselves. And God has so made us as that obviously large tracts of every man's nature are given to him on purpose to be restrained, curbed, coerced, and sometimes utterly crushed and extirpated. God gives us our impulses under lock and key. All our animal desires, all our natural tendencies, are held on condition that we exercise control over them, and keep them well within the rigidly marked limits which He has laid down, and which we can easily find out. There are, further, the relations in which we stand, and the obligations and limitations, therefore, under which we come, to the people round about us. High above them all, and in some sense including them all, but loftier than these, there is the all-comprehending relation in which we stand to God, who is the fountain of all obligations, the source and aim of all duty, who encompasses us on every side, and whose will makes the boundary walls within which alone it is safe for a man to live.

We sometimes foolishly feel that a life thus hedged up, limited by these high boundaries on either side, must be uninteresting, monotonous, or unfree. It is not so. The walls are blessings, like the parapet on a mountain road, that keeps the travellers from toppling over the face of the cliff. They are training-walls, as our hydrographical engineers talk about, which, built in the bed of a river, wholesomely confine its waters and make a good scour which gives life, instead of letting them vaguely wander and stagnate across great fields of mud. Freedom consists in keeping willingly within the limits which God has traced, and anything else is

not freedom but licence and rebellion, and at bottom servitude of the most abject type.

II. So, secondly, note that every attempt to break down the limitations brings poison into the life.

We live in a great automatic system which, by its own operation, largely avenges every breach of law. I need not remind you, except in a word, of the way in which the transgression of the plain physical laws stamped upon our constitutions avenges itself; but the certainty with which disease dogs all breaches of the laws of health is but a type in the lower and material universe of the far higher and more solemn certainty with which 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die.' Wherever a man sets himself against any of the laws of this material universe, they make short work of him. We command them, as I said, by obeying them; and the difference between the obedience and the breach of them is the difference between the engineer standing on his engine and the wretch that is caught by it as it rushes over the rails. But that is but a parable of the higher thing which I want to speak to you about.

The grosser forms of transgression of the plain laws of temperance, abstinence, purity, bring with them, in like manner, a visible and palpable punishment in the majority of cases. Whoso pulls down the wall of temperance, a serpent will bite him. Trembling hands, broken constitutions, ruined reputations, vanished ambitions, wasted lives, poverty, shame, and enfeebled will, death—these are the serpents that bite, in many cases, the transgressor. I have a man in my eye at this moment that used to sit in one of these pews, who came into Manchester a promising young man, a child of many prayers, with the ball at his foot, in one of your great warehouses, the only hope of his house,

professedly a Christian. He began to tamper with the wall. First a tiny little bit of stone taken out that did not show the daylight through; then a little bigger, and a bigger. And the serpent struck its fangs into him, and if you saw him now, he is a shambling wreck, outside of society, and, as we sometimes tremblingly think, beyond hope. Young men! 'whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.'

In like manner there are other forms of 'sins of the flesh avenged in kind,' which I dare not speak about more plainly here. I see many young men in my congregation, many strangers in this great city, living, I suppose, in lodgings, and therefore without many restraints. If you were to take a pair of compasses and place one leg of them down at the Free Trade Hall, and take a circle of half a mile round there, you would get a cavern of rattlesnakes. You know what I mean. Low theatres, low music-halls, casinos, haunts of yet viler sorts—there the snakes are, hissing and writhing and ready to bite. Do not 'put your hand on the hole of the asp.' Take care of books, pictures, songs, companions that would lead you astray. Oh for a voice to stand at some doors that I know in Manchester, and peal this text into the ears of the fools, men and women, that go in there!

I heard only this week of one once in a good position in this city, and in early days, I believe, a member of my own congregation, begging in rags from door to door. And the reason was, simply, the wall had been pulled down and the serpent had struck. It always does; not with such fatal external effects always, but be ye sure of this, 'God is not mocked; "whatsoever a man," or a woman either, "soweth, that shall he also reap."' For remember that there are other ways of

pulling down walls than these gross and palpable transgressions with the body ; and there are other sorts of retributions which come with unerring certainty besides those that can be taken notice of by others. I do not want to dwell upon these at any length, but let me just remind you of one or two of them.

Some serpents' bites inflame, some paralyse ; and one or other of these two things—either an inflamed conscience or a palsied conscience—is the result of all wrongdoing. I do not know which is the worst. There are men and women now in this chapel, sitting listening to me, perhaps half interested, without the smallest suspicion that I am talking about them. The serpent's bite has led to the torpor of their consciences. Which is the worse—to loathe my sin and yet to find its slimy coils round about me, so that I cannot break it, or to have got to like it and to be perfectly comfortable in it, and to have no remonstrance within when I do it? Be sure of this, that every transgression and disobedience acts immediately upon the conscience of the doer, sometimes to stir that conscience into agonies of gnawing remorse, more often to lull it into a fatal slumber.

I do not speak of the retributions which we heap upon ourselves in loading our memories with errors and faults, in polluting them often with vile imaginations, or in laying up there a lifelong series of actions, none of which have ever had a trace of reference to God in them. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the retribution which comes from the habit of evil which weighs upon men, and makes it all but impossible for them ever to shake off their sin. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the perverted relations to God, the incapacity of knowing Him, the disregard, and even

sometimes the dislike, of the thought of Him which steal across the heart of the man that lives in evil and sin; but I put all into two words—every sin that I do tells upon myself, inasmuch as its virus passes into my blood as *guilt* and as *habit*. And then I remind you of what you say you believe, that beyond this world there lies the solemn judgment-seat of God, where you and I have to give account of our deeds. O brother, be sure of this, ‘whoso breaketh an hedge’—here and now, and yonder also—‘a serpent shall bite him’!

That is as far as my text carries me. It has ~~nothing~~ more to say. Am I to shut the book and have done? There is only one system that has anything more to say, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III. And so, passing from my text, I have to say, lastly, All the poison may be got out of your veins if you like.

Our Lord used this very same metaphor under a different aspect, and with a different historical application, when He said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’

There is Christ’s idea of the condition of this world of ours—a camp of men lying bitten by serpents and drawing near to death. What I have been speaking about, in perhaps too abstract terms, is the condition of each one of us. It is hard to get people, when they are gathered by the hundred to listen to a sermon flung out in generalities, to realise it. If I could get you one by one, and ‘buttonhole’ you; and instead of the plural ‘you’ use the singular ‘thou,’ perhaps I could reach you. But let me ask you to try and realise each for himself that this serpent bite, as the issue of pulling

down the wall, is true about each soul in this place, and that Christ endorsed the representation. How are we to get this poison out of the blood? Reform your ways? Yes; I say that too; but reforming the life will deliver from the poison in the character, when you cure hydrophobia by washing the patient's skin, and not till then. It is all very well to repaper your dining-rooms, but it is very little good doing that if the drainage is wrong. It is the drainage that is wrong with us all. A man cannot reform himself down to the bottom of his sinful being. If he could, it does not touch the past. That remains the same. If he could, it does not affect his relation to God. Repentance—if it were possible apart from the softening influence of faith in Jesus Christ—repentance alone would not solve the problem. So far as men can see, and so far as all human systems have declared, 'What I have written I have written.' There is no erasing it. The irrevocable past stands stereotyped for ever. Then comes in this message of forgiveness and cleansing, which is the very heart of all that we preachers have to say, and has been spoken to most of you so often that it is almost impossible to invest it with any kind of freshness or power. But once more I have to preach to you that Christ has received into His own inmost life and self the whole gathered consequences of a world's sin; and by the mystery of His sympathy, and the reality of His mysterious union with us men, He, the sinless Son of God, has been made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The brazen serpent lifted on the pole was in the likeness of the serpent whose poison slew, but there was no poison in it. Christ has come, the sinless Son of God, for you and me. He has died on the Cross, the

Sacrifice for every man's sin, that every man's wound might be healed, and the poison cast out of his veins. He has bruised the malignant, black head of the snake with His wounded heel; and because He has been wounded, we are healed of our wounds. For sin and death launched their last dart at Him, and, like some venomous insect that can sting once and then must die, they left their sting in His wounded heart, and have none for them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brother, here is the simple condition—namely, faith. One look of the languid eye of the poisoned man, howsoever bloodshot and dim it might be, and howsoever nearly veiled with the film of death, was enough to make him whole. The look of our consciously sinful souls to that dear Christ that has died for us will take away the guilt, the power, the habit, the love of evil; and, instead of blood saturated with the venom of sin, there will be in our veins the Spirit of life in Christ, which will 'make us free from the law of sin and death.' 'Look unto Him and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!'

## THE WAY TO THE CITY

'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.'—ECCLES. x. 15.

ON the surface this seems to be merely a piece of homely, practical sagacity, conjoined with one of the bitter things which Ecclesiastes is fond of saying about those whom he calls 'fools.' It seems to repeat, under another metaphor, the same idea which has been presented in a previous verse, where we read: 'If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; but wisdom is profitable to

direct.' That is to say, skill is better than strength; brain saves muscle; better sharpen your axe than put yourself into a perspiration, hitting fierce blows with a blunt one. The prerogative of wisdom is to guide brute force. And so in my text the same general idea comes under another figure. Immense effort may end in nothing but tired feet if the traveller does not know his road. A man lost in the woods may run till he drops, and find himself at night in the place from which he started in the morning. The path must be known, and the aim clear, if any good is to come of effort.

That phrase, 'how to go to the city,' seems to be a kind of proverbial comparison for anything that is very plain and conspicuous, just as our forefathers used to say about any obvious truth, that it was 'as plain as the road to London town.' The road to the capital is sure to be a well-marked one, and he must be a fool indeed who cannot see that. So our text, though on the surface, as I say, is simply a sarcasm and a piece of homely, practical sagacity, yet, like almost all the sayings in this Book of Ecclesiastes, it has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface; and may be applied in higher and more important directions. It carries with it large truths, and enshrines in a vivid metaphor bitter experiences which, I suppose, we can all confirm.

I. We consider, first, the toil that tires.

'The labour wearies every one of them.' The word translated 'labour' seems to carry with it both the idea of effort and of trouble. Or to recur to a familiar distinction in modern English, the word really covers both the ground of work and of worry. And it is a sad and solemn thought that a word with that double



element in it should be the one which is most truly applicable to the efforts of a large majority of men. I suppose there never was a time in the world's history when life went so fast as it does in these great centres of civilisation and commerce in which you and I live. And it is awful to have to think that the great mass of it all ends in nothing else but tired limbs and exhaustion. That is a truth to be verified by experience, and I am bold to believe that every man and woman in this chapel now can say more or less distinctly 'Amen!' to the assertion that every life, except a distinctly and supremely religious one, is worry and work without adequate satisfying result, and with no lasting issue but exhaustion.

Let us begin at the bottom. For instance, take a man who has avowedly flung aside the restraints of right and wrong and conscience, and does things habitually that he knows to be wrong. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. No man who aims at an end through the smoke of hell gets the end that he aims at. Or if he does, he gets something that takes all the guilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the success. They put a very evil-tasting ingredient into spirits of wine to prevent its being drunk. The cup that sin reaches to a man, though the wine moveth itself aright and is very pleasant to look at before being tasted, cheats with *methyated* spirits. Men and women take more pains and trouble to damn themselves than ever they do to have their souls saved. The end of all work, which begins with tossing conscience on one side, is simply this—'The labour of the foolish wearith every one of them.'

Take a step higher—a respectable, well-to-do Manchester man, successful in business. He has made it

his aim to build up a large concern, and has succeeded. He has a fine house, carriages, greenhouses; he has 'J.P.' to his name; he stands high in credit and on 'Change. His name is one that gives respectability to anything that it is connected with. Has he 'come to the city'? Has he got what he thought he would get when he began his career? He has succeeded in his immediate and smaller purpose; has that immediate and smaller purpose succeeded in bringing him what he thought it would bring him? Or has he fallen a victim to those—

'juggling fiends . . .

That palter with us in a double sense;

That keep the word of promise to the ear,

And break it to the hope?'

They tell us that if you put down in one column the value of the ore that has been extracted from all the Australian gold-mines, and in another the amount that it has cost to get it, the latter sum will exceed the former. There are plenty of people in Manchester who have put more down into the pit from which they dig their wealth than ever they will get out of it. And their labour, too, leaves a very dark and empty aching centre in their lives, 'and wearieth every one of them.'

And so I might go the whole round. We students, so long as our pursuit of knowledge has not in it as supreme, directing motive, and ultimate aim and issue, the glory and the service of God, come under the lash of the same condemnation as those grosser and lower forms of life of which I have been speaking. But wherever we look, if there be not in the heart and in the life a supreme regard to God and a communion with Him, then this characteristic is common to all the courses, that, whilst they may each meet some imme-

diate and partial necessity of our natures, none of them is adequate for the whole circumference of a man's being, nor any of them able, during the whole duration of that being, to be his satisfaction and his rest. Therefore, I say, all toil, however successful to the view of a shorter range of vision, and however noble—excluding the noblest of all—all toil that ends only in securing that which perishes with the using, or that which we leave behind us here when we pass hence, is condemned for folly and labour that wearies the men who are fools enough to surrender themselves to it.

I need not remind you of the wonderful variety of metaphor under which that threadbare thought, which yet it is so hard for us to believe and make operative in our lives, is represented to us in Scripture. Just let me recall one or two of them in the briefest way. 'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which profiteth not?' 'They have hewn for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.' 'Their webs shall not become garments.' That may want a word of explanation. The metaphor is this. You are all like spiders spinning carefully and diligently your web. There is not substance enough in it to make a coat out of. You will never cover yourselves with the product of your own brains or your own efforts. There is no clothing in the spider's webs of a godless life.

Ah! brother, all these earthly aims which some of my friends listening to me now have for the *sole* aims of their lives, are as foolish and as inadequate to accomplish that which is sought for by them, as it would be to seek to quench raging thirst by lifting to the lips a golden cup that is empty. Some of us have

a whole sideboard full of such, and vary our pursuits according to inclination and task. Some of us have only one such, but they are all empty, and the lip is parched after the cup has been lifted to it as it was before.

II. And so, consider now, secondly, the foolish ignorance that makes the toil tiresome.

The metaphor of my text says that the reason why the 'fool' is so wearied after the day's march is that he does not in the morning settle where he is going, and how he is to get there; and so, having started to go nowhither, he has got where he started for. He 'does not know how to go to the city'—which, being translated into plain and unmetaphorical English, is just this, that many men wreck their lives for want of a clear sight of their true aim, and of the way to secure it.

There is nothing more tragical than the absence, in the great bulk of men, of anything like deliberate, definite views as to their aim in life, and the course to be taken to secure it. There are two things obviously necessary for success in any enterprise. One is, that there shall be the most definite and clear conception of what is aimed at; and the other, that there shall be a wisely considered plan to get at it. Unless there be these, if you go at random, running a little way for a moment in this direction, and then heading about and going in the other, you cannot expect to get to the goal.

Now, what I want to ask some of my friends here is, Did you ever give ten deliberate minutes to try to face for yourselves, and put into plain words, what you are living for, and how you mean to secure it? Of course I know that you have given thought

and planning in plenty to the nearer aims, without which material life cannot be lived at all. I do not suppose that anybody here is chargeable with not having thought enough about how to get on in business, or in their chosen walk of life. It is not that kind of aim which I mean at all; but it is a point beyond it that I want to press upon you. You are like men who would carefully victual a ship and take the best information for their guide as to what course to lie, and had never thought what they were going to do when they got to the port. So you say, 'I am going to be such-and-such a thing.' Well, what then? 'Well, I am going to lay myself out for success.' Be it commercial, be it intellectual, be it social, be it in the sphere of the affections, or whatever it may be. Well, what then? 'Well, then I am going to advance in material prosperity, I hope, or in wisdom, or to be surrounded by loving faces of children and those that are dear to me.' What then? 'Then I am going to die.' What then?

It is not till you get to that last question, and have faced it and answered it, that you can be said to have taken the whole sweep of the circumstances into view, and regulated your course according to the dictates of common sense and right reason. And a terribly large number of us live with careful adaptation of means to ends in regard of all the smaller and more immediately to be realised aims of life, but have never faced the larger question which reduces all these smaller aims to insignificance. The simple child's interrogation which in the well-known ballad ripped the tinsel off the skeleton, and showed war in its hideousness, strips many of your lives of all pretence to be reasonable. 'What good came of it at the last?'

Can you answer the question that the infant lips asked, and say, 'This good will come of it at last. That I shall have God for my own, and Jesus Christ in my heart'?

Brother! if I could only get you to this point, that you would take half an hour now to think over what you ought to be, and to ask yourself whether your aims in life correspond to what your aims should be, I should have done more than I am afraid I shall do with some of you. The naturalist can tell when he picks up a skeleton something of the habits and the element of the creature to which it belonged. If it has a hollow *sternum* he knows it is meant to fly. On your nature is impressed unmistakably that your destiny is not to creep, but to soar. Not in vain does the Westminster Catechism lay the foundation of everything in this, the prime question for all men, 'What is the chief end of man?' Ask that, and do not rest till you have answered it.

Then there is another idea connected with this ignorance of my text—viz. that it is the result of folly. Now the words 'folly' and 'foolish' and 'foolishness,' and their opposites, 'wisdom' and 'wise,' in this Book of Ecclesiastes, as in the Book of Proverbs, do not mean merely dull stupidity intellectually, which is a thing for which a man is to be pitied rather than to be blamed, but they always carry besides the idea of intellectual defect, also the idea of moral obliquity. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'; and, conversely, the absence of that fear is the foundation of that which this writer stigmatises as 'folly'. He is not merely sneering at men with small brains and little judgments. There may be plenty of us who are so, and yet are wise unto salvation and possessed

of a far higher wisdom than that of this world. But he tells us that so strangely intertwined are the intellectual and moral parts of our nature, that wheresoever there is the obscuration of the latter there is sure to be the perversion of the former, and the man knows not 'how to go to the city' because he is 'foolish.'

That is to say, you go wrong in your judgment about your conduct because you have gone wrong morally. And your blunders about life, and your ignorance of its true end and aim, and your mistakes as to how to secure happiness and blessedness, are your own faults, and are owing to the aversion of your nature from that which is highest and noblest, even God and His service. Therefore you are not only to be pitied because you are out of the road, but to be blamed because you have darkened the eyes of your mind by loving the darkness rather than the light. And you 'do not know how to go to the city,' because you do not want to go to the city, and would rather huddle here in the wilderness, and live upon its poor supplies, than pass within the golden gates. My brethren! the folly which blinds a man to his true aim and mission in life is a folly which has in it the darker aspect of sin, and is punishable as such.

III. Lastly, note the plain path which the foolish miss.

He 'does not know how to go to the city.' What on earth will he be able to see if he cannot see that broad highway, beaten and white, stretching straight before him, over hill and dale, and going right to the gates? A man must be a fool who cannot find the way to London.

The principles of moral conduct are trite and obvious. It is plain that it is better to be good than

bad. It is better to be unselfish than selfish. It is better not to live for things that perish, seeing that we are going to last for ever. It is better not to make the flesh our master here, seeing that the spirit will have to live without the flesh some day. It is better to get into training for the world to come, seeing that we are all drifting thither. All these things are plain and obvious.

Man's destiny for God is unmistakable. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ about the coin. 'Cæsar's!' 'Then give it to Cæsar.' Whose image and superscription hath my heart, this restless heart of mine, this spirit that wanders on through space and time, homeless and comfortless, until it can grasp the Eternal? Who are you meant for? God! And every fibre of your nature has a voice to say so to you if you listen to it. So, then, a godless life such as some of you, my hearers, are contentedly living, ignores facts that are most patent to every man's experience. And while before you, huge 'as a mountain, open, palpable,' are the commonplaces and undeniable verities which declare that every man who is not a God-fearing man is a fool, you admit them all, and, bowing your heads in reverence, let them all go over you and produce no effect.

The road is clearer than ever since Jesus Christ came. He has shown us the city, for He has brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. He has shown us the road, for His life is the pattern of all that men ought to aim at and to be. The motto of the eternal Son of God, if I may venture upon such a metaphor, is like the motto of the heir-apparent of the English throne, 'I serve.' 'Lo! I come to do Thy will'—and that is the only word which will make a human



life peaceful and strong and beautiful. In the presence of His radiant and solitary perfection, men no longer need to wonder, What is the ideal to which conduct and character should be conformed? And Jesus Christ has come to make it possible to go to the city, by that cross on which He bore the burden of all sin, and takes away the sin of the world, and by that Spirit of life which He will impart to our weakness, and which makes our sluggish feet run in the way of His commandments, and not be weary, and walk and not faint.

Take that dear Lord for your revelation of duty, for your Pattern of conduct, for the forgiveness of your sins, for the Inspirer with power to do His will, and then you will see stretching before you, high up above the surrounding desert, so that no lion nor ravenous beast shall go up there, the highway on which the ransomed of the Lord shall walk, 'and the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein.' 'Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may enter in through the gates into the City.'

## A NEW YEAR'S SERMON TO THE YOUNG

'Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. . . . Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.'—ECCLES. xi. 9; xli. 1.

THIS strange, and in some places perplexing Book of Ecclesiastes, is intended to be the picture of a man fighting his way through perplexities and half-truths to a clear conviction in which he can rest. What he says in his process of coming to that conviction is not always

to be taken as true. Much that is spoken in the earlier portion of the Book is spoken in order to be confuted, and its insufficiency, its exaggerations, its onesidedness, and its half-truths, to be manifest in the light of the ultimate conclusion to which he comes. Through all these perplexities he goes on 'sounding his dim and perilous way,' with pitfalls on this side of him and bogs on that, till he comes out at last upon the open way, with firm ground under foot and a clear sky overhead. These phrases which I have taken are the opening sentences and the final conclusion on which he rests. How then are they meant to be understood? Is that saying, 'Rejoice, O young man! in the days of thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes,' to be taken as a bit of fierce irony? Is this a man taking the maxims of the foolish world about him and seeming to approve of them in order that he may face round at the end with a quick turn and a cynical face and hand them back their maxims along with that which will shatter them to pieces—as if he said, 'Oh, yes! go on, talk your fill about making the best of this world, and rejoicing and doing as you like, dancing on the edge of a precipice, and fiddling, like Nero, whilst a worse fire than that of Rome is burning'? Well, I do not think that is the meaning of it. Though there is irony to be found in the Bible, I do not think that fierce irony like that which might do for the like of Dean Swift, is the intention of the Preacher. So I take these words to be said in good faith, as a frank recognition of the fact that, after all we have been hearing about vanity and vexation of spirit, life is worth living for, and that God means young people to be glad and to make the best of the fleeting years

that will never come back with the same buoyancy and elasticity all their lives long. And then I take it that the words added are not meant to destroy or neutralise the concession of the first sentence, but only to purify and ennoble a gladness which, without them, would be apt to be stained by many a corruption, and to make permanent a joy which, without them, would be sure to die down into the miserable, peevish, and feeble old age of which the grim picture follows, and to be quenched at last in death. So there are three words that I take out of this text of mine, and that I want to bring before my young friends as exhortations which it is wise to follow. These are Rejoice, Reflect, Remember. Rejoice—the fitting gladness of youth; reflect—the solemn thought that will guard the gladness from stain; remember—the religion which will make these things ever last.

First of all 'Rejoice.' Do as you like, for that is the English translation of the words, 'Walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes.' Buoyantly and cheerfully follow the inclinations and the desires which are stamped upon your nature and belong to your time of life. All young things are joyful, from the lamb in the pastures upwards, and are meant to be so. The mere bounding sense of physical strength which leads so many of you young men astray is a good thing and a blessed thing—a blessing to be thankful for and to cherish. Your smooth cheeks, so unlike those of old age, are only an emblem of the comparative freedom from care which belongs to your happy condition. Your memories are not yet like some—a book written within and without with the records of mourning and disappointment and crosses. There are in all probability long years stretching

before you, instead of a narrow strip of barren sand, before you come to the great salt sea that is going to swallow you up, as is the case with some of us. Christianity looks with complacency on your gladness, and does not mean to clip the wing of one white-winged pleasure, or to breathe one glimmer of blackness on your atmosphere. You are meant to be glad, but it is gladness in a far higher sense that I want to secure for you, or rather to make you secure for yourselves. God delights in the prosperity and light-hearted buoyancy of His children, especially of His young children. Ah! but I know there are young lives over which poverty or ill-health or sorrows of one kind or another have cast a gloom as incongruous to your time of life as snow in the garden in the spring, that pinches the crocuses and weighs down young green beech-leaves, would be. And if I am speaking to any young man or young woman at this time who by reason of painful outward circumstances has had but a chilling spring and youth, I would say to them, 'don't lose heart'; a cloudy morning often breaks into a perfect day. It is good for a man to have to 'bear the yoke in his youth,' and if you miss joy, you may get grace and strength and patience, which will be a blessing to you all your days. For all that, the ordinary course of things is that the young should be glad, and that the young life should be as the rippling brook in the sunshine. I want to leave upon your minds this impression, that it is all right and all in the order of God's providence, who means every one of you to rejoice in the days of your youth. The text says further, 'Walk in the ways of thine heart.' That sounds very like the unwholesome teaching, 'Follow nature; do as you like; let passions and tastes and inclinations be your guides.'

Well, that needs to be set round with a good many guards to prevent it becoming a doctrine of devils. But for all that, I wish you to notice that that has a great and a religious side to it. You have come into possession of this mystical life of yours, a possession which requires that you must choose what kind of life you will follow. Every one has this awful prerogative of being able to walk in the way of their heart. You have to answer for the kind of way that is, and the kind of heart out of which it has come. But I want to go to more important things, and so with a clear understanding that the joy of youth is all right and legitimate, that you are intended to be glad, and to feel the physical and intellectual spring and buoyancy of early days, let us go on to the next thing. 'Rejoice,' says my text, and it adds, 'Reflect.' It is one of the blessings of your time of life, my young friends, that you do not do much of that. It is one of your happy immunities that you are not yet in the habit of looking at life as a whole, and considering actions and consequences. Keep that spontaneity as long as you can; it is a good thing to keep. But for all that, do not forget this awful thing, that it may turn to exaggeration and excess, and that it needs, like all other good things, to be guarded and rightly used. And so, 'Rejoice,' and 'walk in the sight of thine eyes'; *but*—'know that for all these things God will bring thee to judgment.' Well, now, is that thought to come in (I was going to say, like a mourning-coach driven through a wedding procession) to kill the joys we have been seeming to receive from the former words? Are we taking back all that we have been giving, and giving out instead something that will make them all cower and be quiet, like the singing birds that stop

their singing and hide in the leaves when they see the kite in the sky? No, there is no need for anything of the sort. 'For all these things God will bring thee to judgment': that is not the thought that kills, but that purifies and ennobles. Regard being had to the opinions expressed at various points in the earlier portion of this Book, we may be allowed to think of this testimony as having reference to the perpetual judgment that is going on in this world always over every man's life. A great German thinker has it, in reference to the history of nations, that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, and although that is not true if it is a denial of a physical day of judgment, it is true in a very profound and solemn sense with regard to the daily life of every man, that whether there be a judgment-seat beyond the grave or not, and whether this Preacher knew anything about that or no, there is going on through the whole of a man's life, and evolving itself, this solemn conviction, that we are to pass away from this present life. All our days are knit together as one whole. Yesterday is the parent of to-day, and to-day is the parent of all the to-morrows. The meaning and the deepest consequence of man's life is that no feeling, no thought that flits across the mirror of his life and heart dies utterly, leaving nothing behind it. But rather the metaphor of the Apostle is the true one, 'That which thou sowest, that shalt thou also reap.' All your life a seed-time, all your life a harvest-time too, for the seed which I sow to-day is the seed which I have reaped from all my former sowings, and so cause and consequence go rolling on in life in extricable entanglement, issuing out in this, that whatever a man does lives on in him, and that each moment inherits the

whole consequence of his former life. And now, you young men and women, you boys and girls, mind! this seed-time is the one that will be most powerful in your lives, and there is a judgment you do not need to die to meet. If you are idle at school, you will never learn Latin when you go to business. If you are frivolous in your youth, if you stain your souls and soil your lives by outward coarse sin here in Manchester in your young days, there will be a taint about you all your lives. You cannot get rid of that brave law that 'Whatever a man sows, that, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold, that shall he also reap'—the same kind, but infinitely multiplied in quantity. Let me therefore name some of the ways in which your joys or pleasures, as lads, as boys and girls, as growing young men and women, will bring you to judgment. Health, that is one; position, that is two; reputation, that is three; character, that is four. Did you ever see them build one of those houses they make in some parts of the country, with concrete instead of stones? Take a spadeful of the mud, and put it into a frame on the wall. When it is dry, take away the frame and the supports, and it hardens into rock. You take your single deeds—the mud sometimes, young men!—pop them on the wall, and think no more about it. Ay, but they stop there and harden there, and lo! a character—a house for your soul to live in—health, position, memory, capacity, and all that. If you have not done certain things which you ought to have done, you will never be able to do them, and there are the materials for a judgment. That is going on every moment, and especially is it going on in the region of your pleasures. If they are unworthy, you are unworthy; if they are gross, and coarse, and low, and animal, they are drag-

ging you down ; if they are frivolous and foolish, they are making you a poor butterfly of a creature that is worth nothing and will be of no good to anybody ; if they are pure, and chaste, and lofty, and virginal and white, they will make your souls good and gracious and tender with the tenderness and beauty of God.

But that is not all. I am not going to travel beyond the limits of this present life with any words of mine, but as I read this final conclusion in this Book of Ecclesiastes, I think I can perceive that the doubts and the scepticisms about a future life, and the difference between a man and a beast which are spoken of in the earlier chapters, have all been overcome, and the clear conviction of the writer is expressed in these twofold great sayings : 'The spirit shall return unto God who gave it, and the words with which He stamps all His message upon our hearts, the final words of His book' ; 'God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing.' And I come to you and say, 'I suppose you believe in a state of retribution beyond?' I suppose that most of the young folk I am speaking to now at all events believe that 'Thou wilt come to be our judge,' as the *Te Deum* has it ; and that it is this same personal self of mine that is to stand there who is sitting here? God shall bring *thee* into judgment. Never mind what is to come of the body, the quivering, palpitating, personal centre. The very same self that I know myself to be will be carried there. Now, take that with you and lay it to heart, and let it have a bearing on your pleasure. It will kill nothing that deserves to live, it will take no real joy out of a man's life. It will only strain out the poison that would kill you. You turn that thought upon your heart, my friends. Is it like a policeman's bull's-



eye turned upon a lot of bad characters hiding under a railway arch in the corner there? If so, the sooner you get rid of the pleasures and inclinations that slink away when that beam of light strikes their ugly faces, the better for yourselves and for your lives. 'Rejoice in the way of thine heart and, that thy joy may be pure, know that for all this God will bring thee into judgment.'

And now my last word, 'Remember God,' says my text. The former two sayings, if taken by themselves, would make a very imperfect guide to life. Self-indulgence regulated by the thought of retribution is a very low kind of life after all. There is something better in this world, and that is work; something higher, and that is duty; something nobler than self-indulgence, and that is self-sacrifice. And so no religion worthy the name contents itself by saying to a man, 'Be good and you will be glad'; but, 'Never mind whether you are glad; be good at any rate, and such gladness as is good for you will come to you, and you can want the rest.' 'Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth.' Recall God to your thoughts, and keep Him in your mind all the day long. That is wonderfully unlike your life, is it not? Remember thy Creator; shift the centre of your life. What I have been saying might be true of a man, the centre of whose life was himself, and such a man is next door to a devil, for, I suppose, the definition of devil is 'self-engrossed still,' and whosoever lives for himself is dead. Don't let the earth be the centre of your system, but the sun. Do not live to yourselves, or your pleasures will all be ignoble and creeping, but live to God. 'Remember.' Well, then, you and I know a good deal more about God than the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes

did—both about what He is and how to remember Him. I am not going to content myself by taking his point of view, but I must take a far higher and a far better one. If he had been here he would have said ‘Remember God.’ He would have said, ‘Look at God in Jesus Christ, and trust Him and love Him; go to Him as your Saviour, and take all the burden of your past sin and lay it upon His merciful shoulders, and for His dear sake look for forgiveness and cleansing; and then for His dear sake live to serve and bless Him. Never mind about yourself, and do not think much about your gladness. Follow in the footsteps of Him who has shown us that the highest joy is to give oneself utterly away. Love Jesus Christ and trust Him and serve Him, and that will make all your gladness permanent.’ There is one thing I want to teach you. Look at that description, or rather read when you go home the description which follows my text, of that wretched old man who has got no hope in God and no joy, feeble in body, going down to the grave, and dying out at last. That is what rejoicing in the days of thy youth, and walking in the ways of thine own heart, come to when you do not remember God. There is nothing more miserable on the face of this earth than an ill-conditioned old man, who is ill-conditioned because he has lost his early joys and early strength, and has got nothing to make up for them. How many of your joys, my dear young friends, will last when old age comes to you? How many of them will survive when your eye is no longer bright, and your hand no longer strong, and your foot no longer fleet? How many of them, young woman! when the light is out of your eye, and the beauty and freshness out of your face and figure, when you are no longer able for

parties, when it is no longer a pastime to read novels, and when the ballroom is not exactly the place for you, —how many of your pleasures will survive? Young man! how many of yours will last when you can no longer go into dissipation, and stomach and system will no longer stand fast living, nor athletics, and the like? Oh! let me beseech thee, go to the ant and consider her ways, who in the summer layeth up for the winter; and do ye likewise in the days of your youth, store up for yourselves that which knows no change and laughs at the decay of flesh and sense. A thousand motives coincide and press on my memory if I had words and time to speak them. Let me beseech you—especially you young men and women of this congregation, of some of whom I may venture to speak as a father to his children, whom I have seen growing up, as it were, from your mothers' arms, and the rest of you whom I do not know so well—Oh! carry away with you this beseeching entreaty of mine at the end. Love Jesus Christ and trust to Him as your Saviour; serve Him as your Captain and your King in the days of your youth. Do not offer Him the fag end of a life—the last inch of the candle that is burning down into the socket. Do it now, for the moments are flying, and you may never have Him offered to you any more. If there is any softening, any touch of conscience in your heart, yield to the impulse and do not stifle it. Take Christ for your Saviour, take Him now—‘Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.’

## THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; 2. While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: 3. In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, 4. And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; 5. Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: 6. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. 7. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. . . . 13. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. 14. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.'—ECCLES. xii. 1-7, 13, 14.

THE Preacher has passed in review 'all the works that are done under the sun,' and has now reached the end of his long investigation. It has been a devious path. He has announced many provisional conclusions, which are not intended for ultimate truths, but rather represent the progress of the soul towards the final, sufficient ground and object of belief and aim of all life, even God Himself. 'Vanity of vanities' is a cheerless creed and a half-truth. Its completion lies in being driven, by recognising vanity as stamped on all creatures, to clasp the one reality. 'All is vanity' apart from God, but He is fullness, and possessed and enjoyed and endured in Him, life is not 'a striving after wind.' Leave out this last section, and this book of so-called 'Wisdom' is one-sided and therefore error, as is modern pessimism, which only says more feebly what the Preacher had said long ago. Take the rest of the book as the autobiography of a seeker after reality, and this last section as his declaration of where he had

found it, and all the previous parts fall into their right places.

Our passage omits the first portion of the closing section, which is needed in order to set the counsel to remember the Creator in its right relation. Observe that, properly rendered, the advice in verse 1 is 'remember also,' and that takes us back to the end of the preceding chapter. There the young are exhorted to enjoy the bright, brief blossom-time of their youth, withal keeping the consciousness of responsibility for its employment. In earlier parts of the book similar advice had been given, but based on different grounds. Here religion and full enjoyment of youthful buoyancy and delight in fresh, unhackneyed, homely pleasures are proclaimed to be perfectly compatible. The Preacher had no idea that a devout young man or woman was to avoid pleasures natural to their age. Only he wished their joy to be pure, and the stern law that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap' to be kept in mind. Subject to that limitation, or rather that guiding principle, it is not only allowable, but commanded, to 'put away sorrow and evil.' Young people are often liable to despondent moods, which come over them like morning mists, and these have to be fought against. The duty of joy is the more imperative on the young because youth flies so fast, or, as the Preacher says, 'is vanity.'

Now these advices sound very like the base incitements to sensual and unworthy delight which poets of the meaner sort, and some, alas! of the nobler in their meaner moments, have presented. But this writer is no teacher of 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' and wicked trash of that sort. Therefore he brings side by side with these advices the other of our passage. That

'also' saves the former from being misused, just as the thought of judgment did.

That possible combination of hearty, youthful glee and true religion is the all-important lesson of this passage. The word for Creator is in the plural number, according to the Hebrew idiom, which thereby expresses supremacy or excellence. The name of 'Creator' carries us back to Genesis, and suggests one great reason for the injunction. It is folly to forget Him on whom we depend for being; it is ingratitude to forget, in the midst of the enjoyments of our bright, early days, Him to whom we owe them all. The advice is specially needed; for youth has so much, that is delightful in its novelty, to think about, and the world, on both its innocent and its sinful side, appeals to it so strongly, that the Creator is only too apt to be crowded out of view by His works. The temptation of the young is to live in the present. Reflection belongs to older heads; spontaneous action is more characteristic of youth. Therefore, they specially need to make efforts to bring clearly to their thoughts both the unseen future and Him who is invisible. The advice is specially suitable for them; for what is begun early is likely to last and be strong.

It is hard for older men, stiffened into habits, and with less power and love of taking to new courses, to turn to God, if they have forgotten Him in early days. Conversion is possible at any age, but it is less likely as life goes on. The most of men who are Christians have become so in the formative period between boyhood and thirty. After that age, the probabilities of radical change diminish rapidly. So, 'Remember . . . in the days of thy youth,' or the likelihood is that you will never remember. To say, 'I mean to have my

fling, and I shall turn over a new leaf when I am older,' is to run dreadful risk. Perhaps you will never be older. Probably, if you are, you will not want to turn the leaf. If you do, what a shame it is to plan to give God only the dregs of life! You need Him quite as much, if not more, now in the flush of youth as in old age. Why should you rob yourself of years of blessing, and lay up bitter memories of wasted and polluted moments? If ever you turn to God in your older days, nothing will be so painful as the remembrance that you forgot Him so long.

The advice is further important, because it presents the only means of delivering life from the 'vanity' which the Preacher found in it all. Therefore he sets it at the close of his meditations. This is the practical outcome of them all. Forget God, and life is a desert. Remember Him, and 'the desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.'

The verses from the middle of verse 1 to the end of verse 7 enforce the exhortation by the consideration of what will certainly follow youth, and advise remembrance of the Creator before that future comes. So much is clear, but the question of the precise meaning of these verses is much too large for discussion here. The older explanation takes them for an allegory representing the decay of bodily and mental powers in old age, whilst others think that in them the advance of death is presented under the image of an approaching storm. Wright, in his valuable commentary, regards the description of the gradual waning away of life in old age, in the first verses, as being set forth under images drawn from the closing days of the Palestinian winter, which are dreaded as peculiarly unhealthy, while verse 4b and verse 5 present the

advent of spring, and contrast the new life in animals and plants with the feebleness of the man dying in his chamber and unable to eat. Still another explanation is that the whole is part of a dirge, to be taken literally, and describing the mourners in house and garden. I venture, though with some hesitation, to prefer, on the whole, the old allegorical theory, for reasons which it would be impossible to condense here. It is by no means free from difficulty, but is, as I think, less difficult than any of its rivals.

Interpreters who adopt it differ somewhat in the explanation of particular details, but, on the whole, one can see in most of the similes sufficient correspondence for a poet, however foreign to modern taste such a long-drawn and minute allegory may be. 'The keepers of the house' are naturally the arms; the 'strong men,' the legs; the 'grinding women,' the teeth; the 'women who look out at the windows,' the eyes; 'the doors shut towards the street,' either the lips or, more probably, the ears. 'The sound of the grinding,' which is 'low,' is by some taken to mean the feeble mastication of toothless gums, in which case the 'doors' are the lips, and the figure of the mill is continued. 'Arising at the voice of the bird' may describe the light sleep or insomnia of old age; but, according to some, with an alteration of rendering ('The voice riseth into a sparrow's'), it is the 'childish treble' of Shakespeare. The former is the more probable rendering and reference. The allegory is dropped in verse 5*a*, which describes the timid walk of the old, but is resumed in 'the almond trees shall flourish'; that is, the hair is blanched, as the almond blossom, which is at first delicate pink, but fades into white. The next clause has an appropriate meaning in



the common translation, as vividly expressing the loss of strength, but it is doubtful whether the verb here used ever means 'to be a burden.' The other explanations of the clause are all strained. The next clause is best taken, as in the Revised Version, as describing the failure of appetite, which the stimulating caper-berry is unable to rouse. All this slow decay is accounted for, 'because the man is going to his long home,' and already the poet sees the mourners gathering for the funeral procession.

The connection of the long-drawn-out picture of senile decay with the advice to remember the Creator needs no elucidation. That period of failing powers is no time to begin remembering God. How dreary, too, it will be, if God is not the 'strength of the heart,' when 'heart and flesh fail'! Therefore it is plain common sense, in view of the future, not to put off to old age what will bless youth, and keep the advent of old age from being wretched.

Verses 6 and 7 still more stringently enforce the precept by pointing, not to the slow approach, but to the actual arrival of death. If a future of possible weakness and gradual creeping in on us of death is reason for the exhortation, much more is the certainty that the crash of dissolution will come. The allegory is partially resumed in these verses. The 'golden bowl' is possibly the head, and, according to some, the 'silver cord' is the spinal marrow, while others think rather of the bowl or lamp as meaning the body, and the cord the soul which, as it were, holds it up. The 'pitcher' is the heart, and the 'wheel' the organs of respiration. Be this as it may, the general thought is that death comes, shivering the precious reservoir of light, and putting an end to drawing of life from the Fountain of

bodily life. Surely these are weighty reasons for the Preacher's advice. Surely it is well for young hearts sometimes to remember the end, and to ask, 'What will ye do in the end?' and to do before the end what is so hard to begin doing at the end, and so needful to have done if the end is not to be worse than 'vanity.'

The collapse of the body is not the end of the man, else the whole force of the argument in the preceding verses would disappear. If death is annihilation, what reason is there for seeking God before it comes? Therefore verse 7 is no interpolation to bring a sceptical book into harmony with orthodox Jewish belief, as some commentators affirm. The 'contradiction' between it and Ecclesiastes iii. 21 is alleged as proof of its having been thus added. But there is no contradiction. The former passage is interrogative, and, like all the earlier part of the book, sets forth, not the Preacher's ultimate convictions, but a phase through which he passed on his way to these. It is because man is two-fold, and at death the spirit returns to its divine Giver, that the exhortation of verse 1 is pressed home with such earnestness.

The closing verses are confidently asserted to be, like verse 7, additions in the interests of Jewish 'orthodoxy.' But Ecclesiastes is made out to be a 'sceptical book' by expelling these from the text, and then the character thus established is taken to prove that they are not genuine. It is a remarkably easy but not very logical process.

'The end of the matter' when all is heard, is, to 'fear God and keep His commandments.' The inward feeling of reverent awe which does not exclude love, and the outward life of conformity to His will, is 'the whole duty of man,' or 'the duty of every man.' And that

plain summary of all that men need to know for practical guidance is enforced by the consideration of future judgment, which, by its universal sweep and all-revealing light, must mean the judgment in another life.

Happy they who, through devious mazes of thought and act, have wandered seeking for the vision of any good, and having found all to be vanity, have been led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, in the broad simplicity of the truth that all which any man needs for blessedness in the buoyancy of fresh youthful strength and in the feebleness of decaying age, in the stress of life, in the darkness of death, and in the day of judgment, is to 'fear God and keep His commandments'!









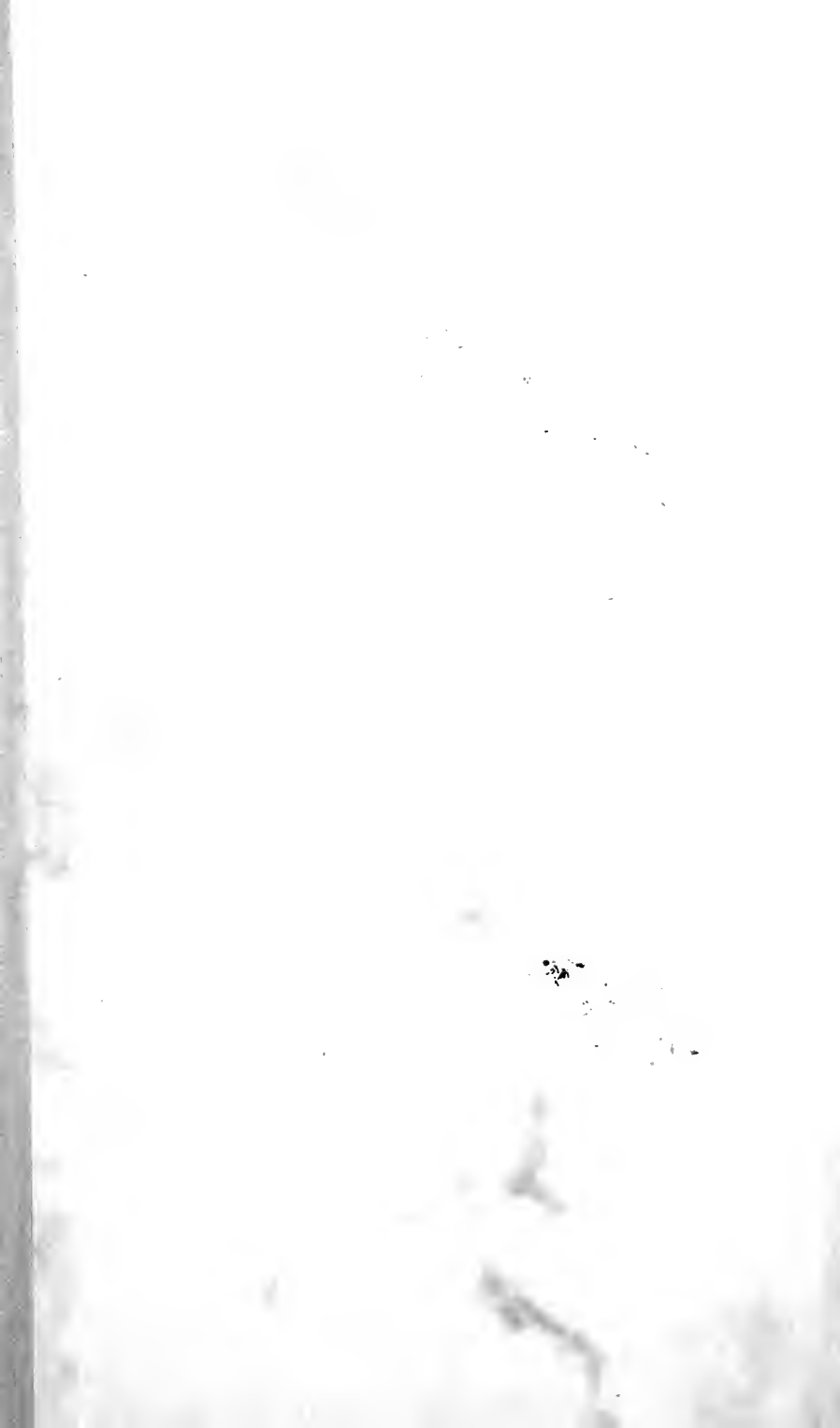






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